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Painted movement flew: a multi-genre collection

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Painted movement flew:

A multi-genre collection

by

Amanda Jolene Fields

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Major Professor: Barbara Haas

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2001

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Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Amanda Jolene Fields

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Major Professor

For the Major Program

For the Graduate College

In Loving Memory of My Grandfathers

Olen D. Williams
April 29, 1916 - December 20, 1999

Ronald Eugene Fields, Sr.
April 9, 1916 - November 9, 2000

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PART ONE: DISORDERED

KNOXVILLE

I. Ronald Fields

In this sliver of Illinois Spoon River branches a mile from my house into muddy Court Creek where turtles emaciate in ant-covered shells where my brother fished among wading cottonmouths where Dad discussed *Spoon River Anthology* in pedantic marveled pretense. *Where we don't cry at funerals*. That body's mouth is sewn into a tight smirk and someone combed the hair down flat. That body is not Grandpa. Perhaps that's why my uncle jitters and laughs and wanders and eyes pages of memorial money. Perhaps that's why my aunt when asked what her father taught her replies *I learned that people don't cry at funerals*. At this funeral, *I am crying*. The minister is a reformed insurance salesman dredged up from the bowels of a religion Grandpa didn't have. The salesman's words fail to indicate Grandpa's suspenders racism love for books marbles in the cognac glass halting repetitive stories bickering with Grandma the blood-filled mouth Dad found in a chair with a fallen newspaper and a still November afternoon. The minister says *society* as if the word itself will prescribe the right type of valium for this occasion. *We are losing this valuable generation of storytellers, neighbors, and courtesy*. My brother and I sustain irony in our eyes while Dad forgets detachment and lets blue pupils fill.

II. Marguerite McMahon Fields

The day after Grandpa's funeral I wheel her through Knox County Nursing Home and she implores me not to *put that black stuff* over her. In bed she turns to the wall and says *I'm not your Grandma*. In the feeding room she stares at pureed splotches of red, yellow, and tan. Nurse airplanes the spoon to that lip-less hole in her face. She squinches then gulps hangs out

her tongue like a cat in heat threatens to retch *I'm gonna throw up. I'm gonna throw up.*

They've moved her to the only-half-out-of-their-minds wing of the Alzheimer's unit after they heard her yelling gibberish in her sleep. She's been diagnosed with paranoia. Which she's always had (*you've always had*) (*always*) (*always had*). She curses now, accusing, rather than muttering under her breath. *When I was a baby my mother was told I had screaming night terrors a paranoia soothed by shuffles up and down the hall cradles in arms pattings reading never left alone.* I try to put my fist beneath her claws as they stitch in unbreakable folding in unpierceable kneading that breaks when her slippered feet slap the floor and she slides away from me. When I stop her wheelchair with one finger, she glares at me like an entrapped tiger. *Shit on the family.* Someone told her about Grandpa's death – the day I picked up her limp body and she couldn't have enough covers *Cover me up Cover me up* and she hated as she's always hated my attempts to pull words from her. I don't tell her I kissed Grandpa's casket yesterday pulled yellow rose petals heard his empty echo and heard her from the nursing home – *They can't bury him with the Catholics.*

Are you mad, Grandma? Are you mad?

-yes-

I don't blame you.

When you die where will this sliver of space open a place to cry?



LONELY PLANET

They didn't constrict his arms
in tight folds of sterile cloth.
He stripped himself naked, though,
dangled thin legs over the bedside,
collapsed in a light blue smock.

(He wasn't as crazy as he had thought.)

He lines up pills at night and thinks about how
they make him drowsy,
drowsier than any of five alarms can wake
in morning, before work.

(They understand.)

He says he's crazy, so they let him sleep, and
they pat his head like a little terrier that
slurped and played not quite enough
and fell asleep too long ago.

The labyrinth of his head is too much for even him.

(That's what the girls say who fondle him when the thinking gets to be too much.

Oh me, oh my. Oh jeez, he hates being touched. OOOOHHHH.)

They'll iron his disheveled clothes and say he's perfect.
Like white rats, they perch and stroke his balding head.
He says he is dying, he is dying,
but his breath refuses to tumble away
like paper in a cyclone.

(They are all dying, they think.)

He lines up pills on the counter at night,
and wishes they'd grow like oversized sea monkeys,
opening their mouths and swallowing him.
Hands shaking, foul air spills from his mouth
and he wonders why he doesn't eat.
He claims he can't recall certain conversations,
claims that the books piled next to his couch
cause his hands to shake too much.
Surely someone will straighten his hands
when they start to curl like paper clips.
They say he's a genius,
and girls want to lie with him and
just think.



PAINTED MOVEMENT FLEW

I used blue because it calmed
the way I wished
to be, to help.

If it were so easy to calm
in the ways I colored
lines, back and forth,
waxing motion, dark, light.

My hands unclenched.

I thought of what is good,
and how to fill it in with blue.



PLANNED DECEASE

We'll blossom remorse for you now –
 our friend of blanketed misery –
 wishing our palms could have kept you
 safe from your self.

I'll wear puffed eye circles,
 fall on frozen ground,
 gnash phrases in my esophagus.

You did it! you did it!
 the perfect plan!

Words will oval-shout,
 a fist to your burial,
 a pox on my soul.
 Oh, perfectly placed trail of despair –
 in a zombie's apartment,
 on computer screens,
 on stacks of CDs,
 in a zillion captured lying photos.
 Hanging up each lost friend,
 each lost lover,
 on your wall of lunatic smiling,
 on the sewn mannerism
 your deathness coaxes
 from a mortician.

And you laugh,
 waiting for a body of remorse
 to jump in with your casket –
 just to slice up the misery.

Yet we *will* be sad,
 you fucker,
 which is all you allowed us to be,
 with you,
 anyway.



BONE ARMS

Remember when I told you to go away,
 to your line-up of pretty canisters
 exhorting particular pressures and twists
 to unlock your childproof tragic?
 Remember me.

You are slurring and stunting, into recorders,
 weakened periods of toxin-lapping,
 bursts of explanation and question –
 the police car, the hospital, the loneliness,
 and why the couch has molded your feet
 so you can't sense the fabric's cords and ridges.
 You cry.

You've stopped gulping Prozac so you won't go crazy.
 And you're crazy, crazy, a manic inkwell,
 splattering back and back on yourself.
 You are cracking nimble knuckles,
 re-reading your words to hoard golden memory
 like bookshelf photos leaning and curling.

Remember when I said I was afraid?
I am.
 You are opening bone arms and shaking.

Remember this when I laugh,
Freak
 because I can do nothing more,
 and those carpeted stairs
 you'll climb in perfect solitude,
 and your bones' capacity
 to fit within closets and cracks.

Even when you shake me,
 alone, I'll erect expectance,
 a paralyzed smile.




ENABLE

I wanted to climb your Prozac summit,
plummet back in so the foam of water
dropped us through to our gauzy sheaf.

I was capsules tumbling from emaciation,
vodka bubbling up feeble throat,
clear sterile scent like nursing home.
You were childproof container of enticement,
assorted discrepancy and quickened fix,
wobbly skeleton posing bone arms to life.

Banishing me, I became lovely,
your milk-thin queen on a coy half-shell.
Allowing me, I became mute and swollen,
your toddler clinging to spindly legs.
Desiring me, I became distraction,
your latest enigma of shattered china.
Forgetting me, I became words,
your framed forfeiture of memory.

Now I hear your wispy dandelion seeds,
constructing more gauze to subdue me
in spaces merely futile for us,
flitting unnoticed, encircling fluff.



CHILD PRAYER

I'm worried.

Grandpa Bill sounded like gravel in the driveway
when he sang Happy Birthday to me
at 7am every April 15th.
He sings and walks his whole body in my dreams,
that's why I think he's still alive,
that's why I think heaven is true.

Grandpa Jessie let me snap his suspenders.
But he hurts in my dreams.
The back of his head is mushy and opens
pink goosh that spills out like fish in a waterfall,
and then he always eats it,
and that's why I think hell is true.

My Granny writes me letters.
She tells me I must go to church.
She underlines MUST 3 times.

Grandma Helen doesn't really talk.
She told me the other day
she doesn't know me.

What if I die?



PART TWO: LIFE

FEAR'S PHOSPHORESCENCE

Fear and I are natural friends. I'm afraid of the dark, lightning, spiders, clowns, parking lots, stairs, and medication. I frequently make the mistake of believing in inevitable outcomes. My brother calls me Mom, Jr. I was that kid who puked at slumber parties once everyone had drifted to sleep – afraid of the shadowed bodies around me, house walls twitching in night wind, and startled gurgles arising from sleeping breath. I thought the Wicked Witch of the West lived in my closet. I ripped up cigarettes my friends stole from their parents, and I refused to hop trains.

And I've always been fascinated with simple observation – the odd contentment of vicarious experience. But sometimes I wish I could experience that famed sense of wild abandon – something simple, like saving the live lobsters from a grocery store, running free through automatic doors while waving the poor creatures in my hands, and then forgetting about it the next day. Just action. *Life*.

June 1999. Galway Writers' Workshop. Ireland.

When I get to Galway, I try to adapt to pastel-colored houses in drab backdrops. Rain plummets for fifteen minutes, then the sun shines, and then the rain begins again – a perpetual interchange of indecision. My face breaks out from the humidity and the wind, and my clothing never really dries.

In and out of workshops at the University College in Galway, I watch the writers around me, quickly observing that despite the supposed joy of the pastoral landscape, almost everyone's main interest is the desire to sleep with everyone else. And everyone talks about

sleeping with everyone else. And everyone does sleep with everyone else, evidenced by sex echoing from the walls around my assigned room.

I resign myself to an observant corner and stay out of the impending melodrama. A stone bench outside the entrance to my lodgings, in a section of pastel-colored flats called Corrib Village, becomes my favorite place to feign writing. But without intending it, I become the venting post for the explosive crushes and betrayals that occur each day between my fellow writers. I watch and listen.

I spend much of my time listening to Catherine, a poet from Arkansas who writes brilliantly about things like bathtubs and sausages and gypsies. The first week we arrive in Galway, she goes to a local pub and promises pussy to any of the codgery men there who can beat her at pool.

Catherine decides to show a mild interest in me, smoking and conversing about bisexuality, beauty, and her history of aggression. She has a swagger and a level of assertion that I envy. She doesn't seem to fear anything. And she knows, somehow, that this makes me fascinatingly uncomfortable.

She does things like poke her pudgy nose up to mine and state, "You're beautiful."

"I'm disgusting," I tell her, and I pull my neck back as her smoke hits my nose. In Ireland, I've become lazy about cleanliness. The damp, windy climate has made my face break out in small bumps. Moody spurts of rain help me avoid showering. I let hair grow soft on my legs, and I wear the same wet clothes every day.

I look down at the cracked pavement in front of the bench, hoping Catherine will move back, out of my space. I say, “*You’re* beautiful.” She laughs and thumps her palm hard against my shoulder.

She laughs and thumps, then her eyes travel slowly across my body. I don’t know whether to be offended or to feel violated or flattered, so I look back. Catherine and I have similar features – hair plastered in wet frizzy waves, ruddy cheeks, short thick legs, cumbersome breasts, tired eyes. She inhales the last bit of her cigarette and tells me about a woman she met last night who had three silver rings in her nose. “She was fucking beautiful.” A bit of smoke dribbles from Catherine’s nose. “Man, I’m gonna fuck as many hot Irish people as I can.”

Sultry and aggressive sex weaves from Catherine’s pores.

Catherine sticks her finger close to my eyeball and says, “Wow. Your eyes are hazel. They sparkle!”, circling her finger in the air. “So, I got with that hot Irish chick. Oh, those nose rings. And that spiked black hair? Damn. Now *she* was beautiful.” Her finger drops.

*

During the second week of workshop, we take a day trip to the Cliffs of Moher, a six mile strip of limestone cliffs on the coast of West Clare. At some points the cliffs are nearly 700 feet from the surface of the Atlantic Ocean. Waves consistently gnaw on the sides of the cliffs, causing pieces of cliff to frequently give way from above. We’ve all dressed warmly. Even in the middle of the summer, ocean winds at the Cliffs of Moher can make the temperature plummet to the thirties. On the drive to the cliffs, I think about how far away I will stand from the edge.

We clamber out of the van and scatter off by ourselves. Clusters of people stand at the edge of the cliffs, not seeming to notice the fierce blusters of wind and the fact that there are no fences, no guardrails, not even warning signs. I wonder how many people have leapt from this height, or how many have been thrown down as a piece of cliff shakes itself to the ocean. How easy it must be.

Red cows snuffle at the grass as I climb to the highest point of the cliffs, lie on my stomach, and hang my head out over the edge. The day is drearily overcast, and I can just make out hazy shapes of land in waves – the Aran Islands, Galway Bay, part of the Twelve Pins, a cluster of mountains in Connemara.

The cliffsides are put together like bitten, soggy backs of puzzle pieces, crevicing in and out down to the ocean. From my view, the cliffs are forming two thick fingers that spread widely and immerse into water that licks at the stability of earth.

There's a calm chaos to the waves, 230 meters below, that is too dreamlike. If I were standing by a cliff in the middle of Illinois, I wouldn't go near the edge. But here I can see outlines of the Aran Islands in the distance, covered with mist, and I deny the reality of my chin on this edge. I lie perfectly flat, the wind flipping at the hood of my sweatshirt. Maybe I could fall asleep.

A little girl, about five or six, sidles next to my head and points down to the brisk curl of waves smashing against the cliffs, to the unpinnable blue of cold water on wet brown solidity. Her father stands too far behind her. I'm thinking of the kid in *Superman* who almost plummets to his death at Niagra Falls. I'm thinking of what it would feel like, anyway, to plummet like that. I close my eyes and listen to her short squeals of discovery.

Sitting up, I dangle one foot over the edge then jerk it back. The wind could push me forward with one indifferent gust. Bracing my back against air, I scoot through the grass, away from the edge. The little girl holds her father's hand and chatters as they walk back down the slope.

From the corner of my eye, I can see Catherine coming up the hill, dragging her feet and staring past me.

She starts to run.

The cows don't look up as Catherine flies toward me, her sandals flapping against bare feet. Her hair flings everywhere from the wind that twirls toward the cliffs, from the force of her body hurling itself uphill, from her panting breath. She's not yelping or laughing, just running, strands of hair covering her expression. Leather thud-plunks on her heels.

"Hey!" She doesn't hear me. She doesn't seem to see the cows munching grass or the loners on the cliff who are oblivious to her flapping sandals or me scooting away from the edge. Her body points and flings. She veers away at the top and runs toward a ridge where cows are grazing. She disappears.

We meet at the van about 45 minutes after Catherine's sprint. Catherine isn't here. We wait and bitch and smoke. No Catherine. I proclaim, "I'm gonna stab her eyes out when she gets here. I'm serious. I'm fucking tired and hungry. This is ridiculous." Someone tells me to shut up.

An hour later, when Catherine climbs into the van, wet curls of hair stick out everywhere. She's grinning and no one stops her. No one mentions her jaunt as we eat dinner.

She grins at me, wide and manic. The grin is her ecstasy, staring at me. I chew thick bites of brown bread and potato and look just past her wide shoulders.

I'm a master at not looking at people, at forgetting they breathe in the same place as me and eliminating presence from the equation of my space. Catherine must sense this because I still feel that grin as if it were leaping and twirling on my face. I can't shake her. I try to chew and swallow, chew and swallow, but I can't shake her grin from space.

*

Our three day sabbatical from workshop is to the tiny island of Inishbofin ("The Island of the White Cow"), the largest of an archipelago made up of Inishark, Davillaun, and Inishlion, off the west coast of Ireland. Inishbofin has two pubs, two hotels, and about 150 residents. Writers like Sylvia Plath have wandered its three mile long solitude to think. Plath, in her angst, must have known that Inishbofin was in legend thought to be a metaphysical island floating on the ocean and covered over in mist. I wonder if some of my footprints will match hers, and I wonder, again, if this space where I perceive myself to be really exists.

On the eight mile trip from the pier in Cleggan to Inishbofin, my fingers curl naively around the railing of the ferry, teeth chattering under closed lips while blue salty waves smack and spray at my body. This ferry is a rickety fishing boat about to spring a leak in the Atlantic Ocean. Waves rise and collapse over me, swirl on the deck, push themselves to the green-faced travelers who sit on boxes in the center of the tilting deck.

The captain of the boat is a badass. He is Clint Eastwood with a craggy skin disorder and years of dry salty sea air coating his face. He stands on the deck and rolls a cigarette, perfectly still while everyone else hangs on to railings and boxes for dear balance. He doesn't

look at anyone, not even when two giggling women ask him for a picture. He licks cigarette paper and lights a match as if the wind doesn't exist. One of the women grabs his elbow and smiles into the camera. The captain ignores the giggling woman and the snapshot, smoking stoically on the rollicking deck.

I've never been on the ocean, but this coating of salt on my cheeks and the fearless sea captain with his composed cigarette are enough to convince me to hang over the railing as it dips to and from the ocean's surface. At this moment, I'd rather drown in this loveliness than sit on a box and hold my stomach. When I lean into the smack of a wave a bit too closely, Catherine grabs my backpack and pulls me from the railing.

We scatter once we get to Inishbofin, tired of being together. In short spurts of rain, I climb down rocks to walk barefoot on the cold white sand of a small beach. A fishing boat, with a stream of gulls behind it, ambles by. I roll my jeans up past my knees and let the cold waves slap me. Water numbs my legs as I fish around for smooth pebbles and weigh down my pockets. My hand freezes as the translucent head of a jellyfish bobs a few feet away, so I inch out and put my shoes back on.

Pebbles shuffle in my pockets as my toes rub sand. A small crab is upended on the sand, waving yellowed legs. I watch the crab's legs twitch and shiver, looking around for a stick or something to turn it upright. Nothing. Not a tree in sight. I leave the crab and push a creeping sense of guilt to the back of my mind, pebbles clicking together.

The ocean has funneled out this plank of white sand, and I sit against the carved guts of Inishbofin, bleeding out from the gnawing of waves. Sheep, with long matted wool and

streaks of blue or pink paint in their coats, graze and shit on the rocky grass surface above me. Waves, rocks, sheep, bogs, and shit. I've quickly discovered how to avoid the deceiving muck of the bogs, bypassing and leaping over black cushions of suction. I go where the sheep seem to have traveled, where they have made sharp hoof marks that form paths in circles that go nowhere.

During our first evening on Inishbofin, we gather in the tiny Doonmore Hotel pub. It's quiet. The night before we arrived, a disorderly Northerner from Belfast was kicked out of the pub. He stumbled to the house of three elderly women, raped them, and set the house and the women on fire. Tonight, Inishbofin locals are sipping pints and looking at us out of the corners of their eyes, daring us to disrespect their silence.

In a circle we play Kings, filling up a pint glass in the middle of the table with a nasty concoction of our various drinks, flipping cards and secretly pleading not to be the one to drink the mix in the awful pint glass. Catherine doesn't keep quiet. Her voice fills up the smoky room. She shouts when she wins, and she yelps when she loses. Dana leans over, asks her to lower her voice. Catherine leaves in a huff.

After making it through two games and avoiding the pint glass concoction, I duck outside to smoke in clean air. Catherine rises from a bench and swaggers over to me, hands in pockets. "You got a fag for *me*, sweetie?" I flip her a cigarette, and she follows me across the dirt road to a set of crumbling concrete stairs. Below, the Atlantic splashes against craggy rocks. I lean back on the wet grass by the stairs and close my eyes. Catherine rustles down beside me. Waves smack against the rocks, and their slight spray trickles on my cheeks.

The pub, a hundred feet away, isn't really there. It can't be there because I no longer hear quiet chatter or sense light through my thin eyelids. I feel clean with this dirty cigarette dampened by the ocean's wet, blowing smoke upward. I could sleep. I *want* to sleep.

Catherine fidgets. "Mandy. Psst. Mandy." I *pretend* like I'm asleep, breathing slowly, though my wrist is raised up with the glowing cigarette. She grabs my arm. "You ready for the greatest experience, woman?" I keep my eyes closed. "No."

She stands up and jerks my arm and my body follows quickly. My elbow throbs. The cigarette flies and its glow extinguishes somewhere. She steadies me, then stumbles close to the top of the stairs. "Jesus, Catherine. Watch it. You're gonna break your fucking body on the rocks." I grab her arm and step back from the edge.

She seizes the neck of my jacket and flings me up to her so her whiskey breath fumes up my nose. "*Phosphorescence*." She closes her eyes and I move back because I'm sure she's going to kiss me. My lips try to run back to the security of my teeth.

Catherine throws her arm widely toward the waves. "Phosphorescence. Come on. You gotta see this." She grasps my wet hand in hers and starts to climb down the stairs. "What are we doing?" I shift my weight back, but her hand tightens in mine. My body tumbles forward with her. "The waves. They're sparking. They're glowing. *Fucking phosphorescence, bitch!* Come on." She yelps and pulls me and we slide and steady and stumble down the stairs. The lights of the pub really do disappear, and I touch her damp back with my other hand to make sure she's there. The waves on the rocks sound like corn funneling out of a combine, that whoosh of a zillion small bits. Sand squishes under my shoes. Catherine pulls me down again, and my cold ass hits the cold wet sand.

I'm beginning to realize that she could kick my ass easily. I'm wondering if I can convince her to go back upstairs, back to the warmth of the pub. I'm thinking of the translucent heads of the jellyfish I saw today, scattered across the beach.

Catherine cups my cheeks in her hands and shakes me. "Mandy, look!" She points.

Phosphorescence. With each crash of waves comes an ensemble of sparks like silent fireworks. The sparks dissipate as waves pool near our shoes. My lips are numb, but I think my mouth must be hanging open in awe.

"Isn't it fuckin' beautiful? God. Look at it." I think I'm nodding my head because Catherine's right, it's one of the most fucking beautiful things I've seen. Dinoflagellates, these microscopic animals, are congregating in the movement of waves, producing a brief glow from a higher energy level of colliding electrons. It's the first time I've seen it. I imagine bumbling bodies of life pulling toward and pushing away from each other, smashing then sparking then disappearing from fading brilliance. Trapped in energy, these bodies meet each other for mere spaces in time.

Catherine puts her arm around me and breathes whiskey into my ear. "Don't ya just wanna drown in it?"

I shiver at the tickle of her breath and the drench of cold salt and water. She rubs her hand on my back. Water seeps under my jeans and into my underwear. "Great. I have one pair of pants. I'm drenched," I say, but then I start laughing because I'm watching this loveliness and bitching about my wet panties.

"Let's go in," she says, and pulls off her shoes and socks. I slip into mother mode. "Catherine, no. We're drunk. That's just fucking stupid," and I have to lean back because she

leers at me with her pale face hovering above the sparking waves and says, “You’re a chickenshit. If you don’t do this, you’re gonna regret it for the rest of your life. It’s the Atlantic Ocean and fuckin’ phosphorescence and you’re never gonna see it like this, exactly like this, again, ever.” She grins and then peels off her flannel and white tank top.

I’m more sober now, and I slowly try to measure how I would come out of this if I pushed her around like she’s been doing to me. I notice the jutting rocks again and imagine my head bleeding against them. She’s probably going to make me do this – either with taunting or pushing or seductive convincing, or after a brawl that I will lose. “Come on, woman. We’re goin’ skinny dippin’.”

I hear voices outside the pub. “Catherine, let’s go back up and see what everybody else is doing,” I coax lamely.

“Mandy, *come on*. You’re too afraid. You gonna be afraid forever?”

I stand up beside her and touch her arm as waves pour in, stumbling bodies and phosphorescence lighting up her toes for a moment. “Listen. You’re drunk. I’m kinda drunk. I don’t feel like dying in the ocean.”

She shakes me off. “Fine. *Pussy*. I’ll go in myself.”

Everything flickers – phosphorescence, Catherine’s floating movements in the waves, the enormity of the ocean, rage, my arms clamping around her torso when she is half-in the waves battering against us and the rocks and the pull of the waves like convulsions spewing and swallowing me, her arms flailing and cold pulses of pain each time she hits me and scratches my arms and how she seems taller even in the unstable footing of moving sand under water and how she seems stronger suddenly than the ocean because she’s pulling me in

and my heels are sliding up in the slip of the sand and I think an entire salty wave thrusts into every orifice on my face and then I hear her strange desperation above the grappling –

“Why don’t you just let me drown?” –

and my ass splashes into the water and we both go under but my arms seem frozen around her and I am clamping down and not about to let go. Drowning with her, my legs flail and I release them for a second and then push off of nothing but water and come back to sand and dig my heels.

At least, I think that’s what happened.

But maybe not because now she’s standing up in the water, her body arching forward with the force of the waves and she’s laughing and half-dragging me to the sand by my aching arms.

Then voices, and Dana, Matt, Mike, Jocelyn, Beth are stumbling down the stairs. Beth hurls off her shirt and runs into the waves while she’s still unzipping her jeans, yelling, “Hey! We’re skinny-dipping! Come on!” Clothing flies, drenched the moment it hits the sand, while bare skin slaps against the waves. “Mandy! Catherine! Come on! Get naked!” Matt raises his fist in the air and whoops. “*Jesus, it’s cold!*”

Catherine stands above me on the sand, watching them start to chickenfight and peeling off her khakis. Dana scrambles her bare legs around the back of Matt’s neck and grasps his head as they slip in the waves, trying to position themselves to do battle with Mike and Jocelyn.

I look up at Catherine again and shiver. She looks down at me and shakes her head, then grins and runs straight into the water. Her head pops up next to Beth in the waves and they giggle and yelp.

I climb back up the stairs. Naked bodies crash and gleam amidst sparks of phosphorescence. Catherine wades out further than the rest, shouting, “This is *so fucking cold!*”

I lie flat on my back for a while in the grass, listening to the splashing and giggling and cries of frozen jubilant pain below. I try to close my eyes and think again. I think about hurling my clothes off. I think about pneumonia. I think about puncturing myself on one of those jutting rocks.

Everything about me is damp, wet, cold. The waves have limpened onto my body, flattening themselves into my clothes and on my skin, and wind slaps at the salt caking my face. I need to go back inside. I peer over the edge once more so I can see the crash and spark of the waves below, but the phosphorescence is gone.



A BATH, A FIRE, & A VANILLA SHAKE

Your uniform will consist of a clean white oxford shirt and ironed, navy blue dress pants. Your hair should be pulled back, out of your face. Black shoes are required. You may wear tennis shoes if they are completely black.

“Lots of these people just want someone to talk to.” Carol ran a hand through her curly hair and stumped out her Capri in the ashtray. A few ashes flickered to the knees of her wrinkled blue pants. There was a yellow dinge on the collar and seams of her shirt.

Record your mileage each time you stop. Record the exact number of miles driven on your mileage sheet at the end of each week.

She saw me looking expectantly at the mileage sheet thrown on the dashboard. “Oh, that. Just estimate when you get done for the day. Round up. I add miles if I spent extra time with a patient.”

Always introduce yourself with, “Hello, [client’s name]. I’m [your first name], from Galesburg Home Management Services.” This greeting, along with your nametag, reassures the client.

Carol buzzed #43 on the intercom outside the apartment building. “Hello?”

“Hey, Maggie, it’s Carol. Go ahead and buzz me in.”

Maggie greeted us at her door and limped to a room cluttered with stuffed animals and faded clothes in piles. She eased into a green recliner and motioned for Carol and me to sit. Carol perched on the edge of a wooden rocking chair and lit another Capri. After closing her eyes and pretending to waft the smoke toward her nose, Maggie reached for a pack of

Parliaments on the coffee table. Carol swirled her cigarette in my direction while I hovered near the kitchen. “Oh, this is Amanda. She’s gonna work for the place. I’m training her.”

“Hi Amanda, hon,” Maggie said as she pointed a remote control and clicked. “You’re just in time for *The Young and the Restless*.”

Check the client’s blue folder (usually located at the top of the refrigerator), sign in, and perform the assigned duties.

If the client wishes to converse, please do so with your time constraints in mind.

Once Carol had finished her Capri, she flipped through a pile of photos that Maggie had brought out for her, then folded some clothes, swept the bathroom floor, and vacuumed during commercials so Maggie could keep watching her show. I washed dishes inch by inch to fill up time.

I was about to become an 18 year old homemaker.

My morning with Carol, coupled with an hour training video and manual, qualified me to begin working for Galesburg Home Management Services – running errands and performing household chores for people who were incapacitated in some way, mostly the elderly. I heard about the job from my friend Marj, who after a week abhorred being a homemaker so much that she quit.

But procrastination and financial desperation won out for me. I also had an impressionable mind, and I knew that at some point I had to get rid of my apprehensive feelings about facing the sick and the aging. *Someday it’ll be me*, I convinced myself. But I’m not sure if I really believed that then.

On my first day of independent work, I was assigned to visit a crumbling building on Prairie Street. I knocked on the door of apartment 72 several times before an angry grunt signaled me to come in. Whiffs of old piss hit me with the creaking door. In a recliner a large man sat, wearing nothing but a pink robe. The robe was open. He was watching a diving competition on TV, his hand clutching a remote control pointed toward the screen.

I put my folder on the kitchen counter, made sure my nametag was in view, and began my required greeting. “Hi, Larry? I’m Amanda, from Galesburg Home Management Services.”

The man said nothing. I tried to avoid looking at the puckered flesh, shadowed in a crevice by his open pink robe.

I retrieved my blue duty folder from the top of the fridge, noticing a bright yellow folder below it labeled “Confidential.”

Only RNs and LPNs can read the yellow folders.

Larry must have been a special case, with a terminal illness. Homemakers were not allowed to read the yellow folders, and I never did. Perhaps I was just afraid of what I would find. According to the blue folder, I was supposed to make lunch, clean the bathroom, and tidy up.

“So, who’s competing here?” My hand waved toward the TV.

Larry grunted, “Make the bed.” He still hadn’t looked at me. The bed was in a corner of the apartment, which was one spacious room and a bathroom. Larry’s chair and the TV were positioned right in the center. I tucked in the yellow sheets and brown comforter, breathing more fully as I became accustomed to the piss smell.

Larry continued to watch sculpted swimmers scissor their legs and calculate their splashes. I decided that I didn't need to talk to an angry, mostly naked man. I did the dishes, swept the floor, and cleaned the bathroom that reeked of stale piss.

Staring, he kept the remote control pointed at the screen. "Are you hungry, Larry?"

Larry looked down, bursting a sigh while the commentators debated the fringe explosions of a splash. "Get me that hamburger in the fridge there. I don't care. Whatever else is there."

I warmed up a hamburger and a can of green beans, spooning out some applesauce on the side. Larry grunted when I handed him the plate, so I left him alone, making up things to do. Things like putting all the pens lying around in an old coffee cup. Filling out my work log with slow deliberation. Dusting off the grate at the bottom of the refrigerator.

When Larry was finished, I washed the dishes again. As I was filling out the verification form for him to sign, he rose from the recliner. The pink robe flapped toward me out of the corner of my eye.

"You have to give me a bath now." Larry was heaving from the walk.

Only RNs and LPNs are qualified to handle clients in certain situations. Bathing is one such situation.

Larry pointed a thick forefinger toward the bathroom.

"Uh, Larry. I don't think I'm supposed to do that." I focused on the ink scratches of the unsigned form.

Angry grunt. "I need a bath. You have to give me a bath."

I tried to make a Larry-narrative in my head. Maybe he didn't have anyone to talk or laugh with. Maybe he knew about the awful piss smell. Maybe he was about to die, maybe he was in horrible discomfort, maybe all I needed to do to alleviate this pain was help him clean up.

Something made me do it. Perhaps it was fear of getting thrashed by Larry. Or fear of insulting a man whose apartment reeked of piss and who had the bright yellow folder on top of his fridge. I wondered whether his confidential illness could be spread. I wondered how much pain Larry was in. As the belt of his robe hung down loose and pink, I wondered why I considered minimum wage and gas mileage to be enough reward for this job.

I followed Larry's flapping pink robe into the bathroom, clenching my stomach muscles together. He clambered onto a plastic chair rigged in the bathtub, after placing his large-framed glasses and robe on the back of the toilet. Blue-grey tattoos stretched across his shoulders and arms like undecipherable, bleeding hieroglyphics.

I took relieved note that his ballooning stomach was hanging out over his penis before I focused my attention on the portable shower-head. I wet his hair and lightly scrubbed shampoo through grey and smoke-stained yellow. Warm water dribbled into his ears as he scrunched his eyes together. I picked up a scrub brush with white bristles flattened to the side and ran it over his back, the skin pressing in and plumping back like a plum. Once I had soaped him briefly with a washcloth, I rinsed him with the showerhead, the spray misting my face. I turned off the water. "OK."

He opened his eyes and squinted at me. "You're not done yet."

"Yes, I am."

“Aren’t you going to wash down there?” He pointed in the direction of his penis, invisible beneath his belly.

“I’m not gonna do that.”

“What?”

“I’m not comfortable doing that.” I patted his skin with a thin towel, and then handed it to him.

Larry scrambled out of the tub and threw his robe over his shoulders as I went to the kitchen to get the signed form and get out. He grabbed the phone, called my supervisor, and heaved, “This girl here won’t give me a bath. Yeah. Bye.” When he hung up the phone, he slapped on a scribbled signature and heaved over to the TV, not looking at me.

I didn’t actually think until I’d escaped Larry’s apartment and was driving back to the main office. The man could walk, help himself into the tub, scramble out, and put on his own damned pink robe. Why wouldn’t he be able to bathe, with minimal help from me?

In my supervisor’s office, I clarified what had happened, concluding with, “I am *not* qualified to give people baths. I am *not* paid to do it. And I *won’t* do it again.” This was perhaps one of the only moments in my 18 year old life in which I found raw, living assertion. My supervisor nodded and agreed with me pleasantly. They were desperately short of employees.

*

Since I refused to return to Larry’s apartment, I was re-located to Brown Avenue, where George and Ruthie, the tiniest couple I have ever met, lived. They were both solid wrinkles, as if they had made a pact to shrink and sag together. Notes in the blue folder

revealed that Ruthie was developing Alzheimer's, and that George was too weak to care for her full time by himself.

After I had read through my assigned duties, George smiled and motioned for me to follow him to where Ruthie was sitting up on an afghan-covered couch. "She needs the bathroom."

"OK." She was staring with her mouth agape at the TV.

George smiled at me and nodded his head toward her hands, which were crooked up. "She needs help." He bent down into a chair. "I'm too tired to get her there."

I pulled her up as gently as I could, her brittle breath floating at me. She moaned a soft "Owwwww." Ruthie was so weak that it pained her to be touched.

I followed her to the bathroom with one hand steering her elbow, afraid I would break her. She eased on the cracked toilet and moaned. Darting my eyes from Ruthie to the pink soaps shaped like dusty butterflies on the sink, I tried to talk as she winced and sighed. She referred to me as "Martha," "Jane," and "Jimmy." I understood from her garbled phrases that "Ricky" was coming to visit. She couldn't tell me where he lived. The smell of shit and stale must was filling the room.

When Ruthie was done, I handed her a wad of toilet paper. It unfurled in her hands. She couldn't reach back to wipe. From the living room, I could hear *The Price Is Right* turned up loudly, Bob Barker asking for bids. I held my breath and wiped for Ruthie, lifted her from the seat, and pulled up her elastic-waisted pants as she moaned "Owwwww."

Ruthie toddled over to the sink and squinted in the mirror, slowly lifting her hand to touch her frizzed hair. Her eyes were in a deep glaze. I found a brush in a drawer, and barely

touched her hair with it as she closed her eyes, leaning against the sink. She smiled and kept raising her hand toward her hair, watching her forehead in the mirror.

After I walked Ruthie back to the couch and lowered her to a comfortable position, George handed me a grocery list he had painstakingly made while we were in the bathroom.

Bread, milk, oatmeal, grape jelly – slow, pen-in-mouth letters.

Then he gave me some food stamps. In Kroger's checkout lane, I handed the stamps to the cashier and asked, "Is this the right amount?". Looking around, I explained in a loud voice, "I'm getting groceries for some of my *clients*." I immediately felt like a jerk. The pimply cashier handed me a receipt and greeted the next person in line.

George toddled into the kitchen when I returned and declared that he wanted oatmeal and toast for lunch. The stovetop was filled with grease, and I decided I would clean up the mess in and around the burners after feeding George and Ruthie.

I put a pan of water to boil on the stove, and sat down at the kitchen table to fill out my work log. George and Ruthie watched *People's Court* in the living room.

Then I heard a whoosh behind me. I stood up. Flames shot past and above the pan of water about two feet. For a few frozen seconds, I watched the fire, then fluttered around the kitchen looking for an extinguisher, all of my handy fire safety tips muddled in my head. *Water won't work, water won't work*, I kept thinking. I reached my arm around the flames and turned off the burner. The flames kept burning. No extinguisher. Everything I knew about grease fires went cockamamie. *Flour. Cover it. Baking soda. No water. What kind of extinguisher. Christ.* I threw open a few cupboards in a desperate search for any kind of white powder. Nothing. It kept burning.

Grabbing the phone, I dialed 911. “1347 Brown Avenue.” I told George to get up, there was a fire. He glanced at me in a haze and turned up the TV. “Come on, George.” I nudged Ruthie awake and started to lift her up. She yelped in pain. “I’m sorry; I have to get you guys out of here. There’s a fire in the kitchen.” My second emphasis on the word “fire” registered for George. He sat up. “What?!” I glanced back to the kitchen. The flames were lowering. Shit. “Come on, I called the fire department, just to be safe. Let’s just go outside for a few minutes, OK?” George stood up, irritated wrinkles pushing out on his forehead. “What’d you call the fire department for?!” Ruthie was crying from me touching her arms. “Just come on.” I turned around. The fire had died. Sirens shouted outside. George kept shaking his head. “OK, well, you guys stay here. I’m sorry.”

I quickly imagined condescending firefighter faces listening to my lame apology. Embarrassed, I went outside and explained what had happened. They insisted on examining the place anyway. When they tried to talk with George, he said, “It’s that girl’s fault. I don’t know why she called. I don’t know *why* she went and did that.”

One of the firefighters discovered that the smoke alarm was missing batteries, and he told me that someone would be by later in the day to remedy that. I was also pointed to the obvious fact that the stovetop’s accumulated grease and dirt was a fire hazard. I scrubbed the stovetop clean after serving toast to an angry George and a not-hungry Ruthie.

*

Later that summer, I was assigned to Abingdon, a small town outside Galesburg. I was told ahead of time that my clients were Gloria, an 80 year old woman, and Gloria’s 53 year old “developmentally disabled” daughter Katharine.

Gloria and Katharine's house became my favorite stop, but I had to get used to a few particulars. For instance, during a two hour time span, Katharine would want to change her underwear at least four times. She had a bladder the size of a pea, and after each visit to the bathroom, she made me take out a clean pair of white Hanes Her Way from her bureau. If any of her requests were not approached immediately, she would wail, pushing her bottom lip out and flailing her fists.

Only RNs and LPNs are qualified to handle clients in certain situations.

Administering medication is one such situation.

The first time I visited Gloria and Katharine, my supervisor told me that Katharine took a pill every day at 3:30, and that I should give it to her when Gloria said so. After I cleaned up the kitchen and ran the vacuum upstairs, Gloria handed me a few dollars. I was to go to McDonald's to get Katharine her afternoon vanilla shake. Katharine had just been dropped off by the schoolbus, and she flung on the kitchen floor an old-school lunchbox with Alvin & the Chipmunks singing and playing on the front (I used to have the same one).

When I came back with the vanilla shake, Gloria instructed me to get a plastic spoon. She hobbled into the kitchen after me, checking behind her to make sure Katharine was occupied. Katharine was perched on her knees at the coffee table in the living room, coloring a picture of a butterfly with a purple crayon clenched in her chubby fist. Producing a small white pill from her pocket, Gloria whispered, "Now, put this pill on the spoon and cover it up with a bite of shake. She won't take her medicine unless she doesn't know she's taking it."

Katharine plodded into the kitchen as Gloria left me there. Her hands reached out for the shake. "Gimme."

“Um, let’s sit down at the table to eat this, OK?” I slipped the pill on the spoon when she turned around and slid into a chair. I cleverly hid the pill under a bite of ice cream. As I sat beside her, Katharine smiled at me, and I smiled back, all warm and nice. “Here you go.” She grabbed the spoon. I watched it closely to make sure the pill didn’t fall.

Katharine swallowed the ice cream and immediately spit out the pill.

“NO.”

She wasn’t about to fall for any of my crap.

For the next ten minutes, Katharine shoved me, wailed, pushed out her lower lip, tried to bite my fingers, and yelled “NO NO NO” as she clunked around the kitchen. Oblivious, Gloria sat in the living room with her feet propped on a chair, watching Bob Ross paint happy little trees.

Katharine ran past her mother’s propped feet into a guest bedroom, tumbling on the bed and covering her mouth. “NO! NO! NO!” She kicked my hip after I sat beside her and patted her leg.

“Katharine,” I said as sternly as I could. “This will make you feel better. Just take it.”

“NO!” Apparently, this wasn’t the rationale she needed.

Stirring at the shake, I decided upon a different tactic. When Katharine opened her mouth to wail again, I tossed in a mouthful of ice cream and pill, pressing my finger firmly to her lips. Confused, she swallowed fast, scratched my arm with her fingernails, and bit me.

Although Katharine never stopped denying the pill, she warmed up to me quickly, kissing my cheek with prickly lips before I left each afternoon.

Before I became a homemaker, carding kids who wanted cigarettes and cleaning grease out of donut machines was about as ethically stimulated as I got in the work world. Toward the end of my summer of homemaking, perhaps I should have been developing a sense of satisfaction or fulfillment from underpaid service. Instead, I became depressed by the thought that I could “brighten someone’s day” by cleaning the bathroom or “make a difference” by struggling to force a pill down someone’s throat. Or, the thought that my brief appearances could actually improve upon the life of people who, in my impressionable and somewhat skewed mind, were closer to death than I could fathom.

What happened was that I began to feel pain with and for these “clients,” and I didn’t like it, nor could I handle it with a necessary stoicism. Any growing fondness for regular “clients” was tinged by an anvil-like sadness. I was happy to get back to my oblivious bubble of schooling. And I found jobs with papers, manila folders, and phones to fill my financial needs.

*

Last November, as I wheeled my Grandma through the Alzheimer’s unit of the nursing home, I had a new kind of sadness, one that manifested itself in a strange, floating detachment. My Grandpa had been buried the day before, and the only indication that Grandma understood that he was gone was her pleading repetition: *Don’t let them put that black stuff over me. Don’t let them put that black stuff over me.* I remember pulling her up from the wheelchair to put her in bed, her body so limp that her feet caught on the chair, dragging it with us. She told me she didn’t know me.

My parents came with me on a more recent visit, during which Grandma stuffed her eyeglasses up the sleeve of her shirt, ignored my Mom, and shouted for me to “SHUT UP!” My Mom leaned her head on my Dad’s shoulder when we stepped outside, crying. I walked ahead, unlocking the car and turning on the radio, as if the nursing home and my grandmother were floating in an opaque bubble that I could see inside of only when forced to.

I remember what it was like to touch the bristles of a brush to Ruthie’s hair and watch her eyes in the mirror. To hold my breath and wipe for her. Something in me made me feel responsible for providing a fleeting sense of comfort to my “clients.” And, although I felt disconnected from them, perhaps I saw them in terms of a fearful mortality, rather than in terms of the vast human condition.

A long time ago, I brushed Grandma’s hair while she clutched my hand and stared at the wall, pointing out pink and yellow things invisible to me. Now, I watch nurses airplane pureed splotches of chicken or stewed tomatoes to Grandma’s shriveling lips. Seeing Grandma lost in an inverted labyrinth, I am stoic. And I fear this detachment more than I feared the fuzzy threat of death at the age of 18.



IN THE GROUND

I like the taste and smell of the ground. I like a certain amount of dust in my mouth, the salty nothing taste of dirt, which I frequently sampled in dirt pies and dandelion soup as a child.

I grew up in the ground.

I had the exceptional experience of growing up in an unfinished house, on a gravel road in a piece of western Illinois countryside. My family decided to live on lonely Aloha Road, surrounded by oaks, muddy Court Creek, wild mushrooms, hedgeapples, limestone, and a random few farmhouses.

Neighbors were there, but invisible. At the first sharp curve in Aloha Road, a mailbox near the ditch is the only indication of a house that is somewhere behind a row of pine trees and a grass-covered driveway. For fifteen years, our neighbors, the Sollenbergers, planted tree after tree after plant after plant after garden after garden until their house was hidden from view.

Before the plethora of plants walled in the Sollenbergers, the land was sparse and barren from unfinished construction, as if one day a man was clearing a space for his new home, and the next day he was snatched into the sky. When my parents built our house, the valley across from our driveway had been bulldozed and uprooted for landscaping that never happened. The land was ugly, bare patches and piles of dirt and a huge pit where someone had begun to dig a basement. The Sollenbergers' orange-shuttered brown house gaped across that patch of dirt and new grass and seedlings. I would climb in the pit as a child and keep an eye on the orange shutters because I wasn't skeptical about the idea that the shutters were

really eyelids, ready to blink at any moment, and that the house would slide toward me, a brown goblin. The abandoned pit eventually filled up with bushes and weeds and bugs and bunnies. And the barren valley began to flourish with coarse grass, thick oaks, maples, rabbits, snakes, raspberry bushes, gooseberries, and a thickness that stepped in front of our line of vision.

Before my parents decided to build a home, they rented a house a few miles away, one of those white peeling lonely farmhouses. My dad was an ag teacher and farmed with my Grandpa, and my mom was twenty-four, raising two children, and going to college for an associates degree. They had no money.

Because we moved when I was four, I only have a few memories from the old farmhouse. I remember drinking strawberry Quik because I thought that the rabbit on the front of the aluminum tin would be pleased with me. The house had a lot of room, but my parents did not have enough money to heat the entire place, so we stayed on the first floor. What I remember of the upstairs is one room filled with hard fly carcasses and a few boxes.

When my parents decided to build a house on a plot of my Grandpa's land, my family dove from the first floor to the basement. Cotton Ponder, local carpenter, dug out our basement in the side of a hill. My parents packed up our belongings to move, finally, to a place of our own.

I understood, at four, that I would have my own room, and that I would no longer be stuck in a playroom, in a baby's bed. My mom led me through the 1200 square foot basement as Cotton Ponder plastered walls in white, swirling plaster-clouds that made the same kinds of animal and face shapes as sky-clouds. The concrete floor was covered in sawdust and nails

and drips of plaster. The whole place was a menagerie of potential terror for a four year old – the swirled characters drooling in plaster, bent nails poking up, the cold, hard concrete. I asked my mom if this was going to be our floor. Once we began to build on top, she reassured me, things would look much different.

But I suspected that something strange was happening with our basement when a bulldozer cleared away one whole side of it, exposing a drab brick wall. I became even more suspicious when two doors were built into the exposed wall, one sliding glass door and one door with a knob. I remember the humid day when we set up tables in our old yard, and I watched my mom carefully as she put price stickers on my old toys. I perused the tables with a cautious eye, making sure that none of my “good” toys were on the tables, accusing my mom when I found a precious ratty doll or an expendable bag of marbles slung onto a wobbly table of glasses, tv trays, and Tupperware.

What I didn’t know, as I was sneaking my prized toys away from tables, was that my parents had decided they couldn’t yet go into so much debt for this house. The basement house was supposed to be temporary, a place to live until we built the “real” house that would rest on top. And this basement would have to do until my parents could come up with enough money to build more.

So our home became an incomplete representation of a larger project, something that I dreamt about as I drew intricate crayoned blueprints of the future. A magenta spiral staircase twined up from the center of my former bedroom into the mansion above, where I had a library and a pool table, and spacious spring green French doors opened to a pool and sauna.

Eventually, my parents paid for our basement. We had enough money for a real house, but the temporary setting had become a permanent fixture. We were surrounded, in the ground, for good.

I was worried about the enclosed nature of our home, especially when Mrs. Fillman, my third grade teacher, assigned us to map out emergency fire escape plans. She suggested that, if all other routes were consumed by fire, we should jump out of a window. With 8 year old mathematical precision, I calculated that my bedroom window was about 4,000 miles away from the top of my head. After numerous maps, crumpled up and tossed away, I quickly determined that my fire plan could be nothing but futile. There was simply nowhere to go but out the front of the house. Even if I were able to tie sheets in knots and climb my way up to the window, I might not fit through the small rectangle. Flames would leap up tragically and burn my feet if my butt got stuck in the opening. I envisioned getting outside and then forgetting the rest of my family. And, what I would do first if the house started burning? Warn my parents and brother, maybe grab Bosco the guinea pig, snatch up my locked diary?

I became obsessed with the danger of fire, and I wondered if Mrs. Fillman would give me an A. Perhaps she would laugh at me and tell everyone about my silly house and how someone forgot to make it fire-escape friendly. I didn't want to tell my parents that we would definitely die if we couldn't get to the front of the house, so I feigned confidence when I presented to them the great fire escape plan. Even though my plan only indicated that exits could be found at the front left and the front center of the house, my mother praised my efforts and put the plan on the refrigerator with a cookie magnet. I presumed that I was the only one who noticed that there were simply not enough alternatives for escape. I resolved to

keep my senses alert to the threat of fire, afraid to sleep, always watching to make sure the oven was off, the toaster was unplugged, and electrical outlets were not overloaded.

For most of my childhood, I lived in this “in-the-ground house,” as my mom calls it. As she would say, “It’s not all the way underground.”

When a person who lives on the ground finds out about my house, the inevitable question is, “So you don’t have any windows?”

And I usually respond with, “Well, the whole front of it is open.” As if this explanation suffices.

Perhaps I *should* respond with something like, “Well, technically, the front of our house is not immersed into the earth, and there *are* some small windows in the back because it’s not as if the house is totally beneath the ground, and our front door is actually a sliding glass door so we do get enough natural light.”

And, the whole front of it is open.

But, with my family, explanations are complete and intact upon utterance. If the front of our in-the-ground house is open, the front of our in-the-ground house is open. How much clearer do we have to be? Obviously what we mean is that the driveway declines from the gravel road in a small curve to the front patio (a rectangular slab of concrete) where a house is immersed in a yard which is kept from spilling onto the patio by a few boards fencing in ground. The patio sits in front of a drab brick wall interrupted by a sliding glass door (our front door), two sets of windows – one peering into the living room and one into the kitchen, and a “normal” door on the far right that enters the utility room. If I stand at the edge of the

patio when the sun isn't blinding the glass, I can see the kitchen table, the back of the couch, shelves that divide space to make a hallway, the bathroom, the entrance to my parents' bedroom, the kitchen counter, and the entrances to two children's bedrooms.

Anyone can get a good glimpse of the house's interior by standing ten feet away from the front door, yet we are surrounded by dirt. The ground, being opaque, *should* afford a certain amount of privacy – dark, damp, cavelike. But if a car weaves down the driveway, everyone in the house knows it.

The whole front of it is open.

Asking my family for a logical explanation or a complete narrative of anything is like trying to put together a jigsaw puzzle whose pieces have been chewed up beyond repair at key corners, at necessary transitions, at any indication of order. I've learned to both expect and deliver incomplete narratives.

It seems that every project we undertake – whether it is building a house or simply telling a story – never follows an easy code of logic. We have big ideas and we follow these ideas in no particularly effective order. Our garage (also in-the-ground) is filled with dusty physical traces of these ideas. A 1970 GTO Judge rusts itself away while Orange Cat, our visiting stray, sleeps in an oval bed on its hood. Wooden model airplanes rot in the rafters from my brother's short-lived obsession with flight. A few rusty windmills stand half-sanded and un-painted from my brief stint as a restorer. The garage is filled with these unsatisfied ventures.

Perhaps my family simply has different perceptions about completion. Perhaps we unconsciously believe in results that change our distinctions between process and completion. Familial incompleteness – undone yet finished.

Our in-the-ground house is a small interruption in the land. Seven ancient oaks stand in the yard, oaks that were there long before anyone thought of disrupting the hills. My brother and I used these oaks for climbing, for swinging, for hiding, for bark-picking. No trees on this piece of land were uprooted to make way for our home. Cotton Ponder just dug and shaped and fit a basement into the ground, then pleasantly worked with what was there once my parents discovered that they had nothing. Our home, then, became part of the land – as if it sprang in the dirt, a fetus still curled like fetuses in glass jars, never growing but comfortably contained. Carved out within the earth, fitting its piece in with as little ruckus to the flow of life around it as possible.

Instead of completely changing the nature of the hills, by flattening, planting, packing, and replanting, my parents changed the concept of the yard, two hills with a gravel driveway in between. And the yard is always slightly changing – shaped and ending wherever my parents choose to stop mowing within the sweeping hills in which our house is built.

It sounds beautiful, like Thoreau should come sauntering by at any moment to worship my family's genius.

Beautiful but false. Of course my family had no concerns about the way our new home would work with the land in a partnership, no Frank Lloyd Wright concepts about how to create as little interruption in the flow of land as possible, no intentions of our home carrying on a non-threatening discussion with the land.

Our home was merely built into a hill. Across the dipping driveway is a small valley, and behind our home and its expansive backyard is another huge valley, broad enough that I can sit on my roof and feel as if the farmhouse on the other side is a landscape painting. The roof itself slants down almost at level with the ground, and I wonder how this diagonal appears to people sitting on the porch of that farmhouse.

Most people think it's odd. Friends in high school called my house "the bomb shelter," and none of them could fathom living within cold concrete walls not covered by proper paneling and insulation. Some friends insist that I'm obligated to inform people about my childhood house in the dirt. Apparently, my parents' in-the-ground house is a marker of my identity, like a cleft chin. One friend gaped in horror when I told him about the house, and then reprimanded me – "Don't you think that's something that you should have *told* me about yourself?" As if I should have introduced myself by stating, "Hi, I'm Amanda, I like cats and writing and autumn. I grew up in an in-the-ground house."

I wonder about the strange, inherent nature to the structures we make. I wonder about the general human tendency to build things that protrude from the ground, exposed and vulnerable. Beavers make dams. Birds make nests. Spiders make webs. Snakes slither in holes. Moles and ants burrow intricate mazes. Moles do not have brick, but ants have dirt, and rabbits make bedding. And humans dig holes and change our minds and watch grass fill them up and change our minds again and fill, blow up, and burn the holes.

My family's house is a shadowed hole. The back side of our home sticks out of the ground about a foot, so little rectangular panes of light enter the back rooms. Daphne, my parents' cat, likes to perch in the rectangle window in my parents' bedroom, where ground

squirrels scurry by her nose, leaves whirl past in the autumn cold, and snow piles up and covers the light. The ground is right there.

Our windows are open to a light that scatters in on our security. When I was a child, my bedroom window seemed far away, the pane perched near the ceiling. Sleeping was scary because, at night, it was dark. *Dark*. No street lights. Nothing but stars. The ground was right there, covering up the brightest moon. I would stare into the darkness until the darkness started moving, little blobs of paranoia widening in my pupils and moving toward me as I pulled up the covers and sweated and breathed in out in out in out until leaping up and tearing to my parents' room, where my mom (she slept closest to the door) would sigh and get up, again. She would drag a kitchen chair into my room to sit until I fell asleep. Her patiently annoyed shape was illuminated by the blue light bulb in my closet, and I would watch her and whimper if she tried to leave me while I was awake.

She often said, "Just go to sleep, Amanda. Just go to sleep. Think of good things. Think of flowers and sunshine and puppies." If I had already woken her up that night, I'd scurry to my dad and shake him awake. He never said anything, would just tread to the living room couch, which I could see from my room, and I would listen to his snoring until I fell asleep. Sometimes my brother would hear me getting up and call from his room, "Hey. Stop getting up. Go to sleep." At other times, he would climb in the recliner and tell me to get on the couch so Mom and Dad could rest. Eventually, I was able to lie in the stillness and close my eyes to create images that weren't darkness. At some point, I got used to the sound of crickets and our dog Cassie barking at coyotes and nothing but breath.

It took me a long time to find sleep in rooms with real windows in real cities. In Ames, where I now live, the sun finds me every morning. Thin blinds in my bedroom are not enough. I hear morning traffic and birds and the Ames High School marching band. I hear the family on the other side of the wall talking, two little girls in a morning world filled with putting on shoes, drinking juice, brushing teeth, crying, and singing. I hear these things through paper walls.

When I go home now, my body associates my cool, dark bedroom with a consistent nighttime that remains undisturbed in the morning. No cars or birds or people, except for soft voices over the drip of coffee or a hairdryer. I burrow in those covers when I'm home, and at these moments my cave, my house, seems secure.

When I visit my parents, I do feel as if something in the house grounds me, gives me back a security like that of no other home. We are firmly rooted in the ground. During storms, winds, and rain, nothing creaks or shifts except the television antenna and the oak trees.

When a snowstorm would blanket our house, covering up the back windows and holding us in, we sat in front of the kerosene heater and saw nothing but drifts and swirls at the sliding glass door. Snow, on the ground and over most of the house, created a tranquil sound barrier. We felt, literally, packed into a secret place. The snow would be more than halfway up the sliding glass door, flakes breezing past. The ground enveloped us.

I was born in the wide open spaces of the Midwest, but I grew up surrounded in a bed of dirt. Now, in structures jutting up from the ground, perhaps I am unbalanced in a way that makes sense to the fragmented sensibility of my family. Whenever I drive away from our in-

the-ground house, I glance back at my dad standing in front of the drab brick wall, wave, and watch the hill swallow him up.

The house disappears as I turn the corner, dust churning behind, and skeletons rise in front of me.



WITH-IN SKIN

Assembling Portraits

A few years ago, my friend Beth told me that she wanted to paint “real” figures, but she couldn’t find the right, willing models to fit her description. So she began to paint self-portraits. One of Beth’s paintings now hangs on the west wall of my bedroom, a daily message of empathy.

One half of the canvas is a female figure. Her elbows angle out slightly as her hands, one on top of the other, cover her vagina. A yellow circle subtly hovers around the modest hands. The sweep of a half-circle grazes her stomach, standing off the canvas and extending out from the edge. Her legs dwindle off past her knees. Headless. Above the headless figure is the faint scratch – “female God.”

The other half of the textured canvas is orange, burnt, maize, and green. Two cut-out paragraphs from a book are buried beneath the colors. Words fade in and out from beneath layers of paint: “protectress,” “social order,” “marriage,” “nourishing,” “earth.”

I let the headless woman stay, knowing that I am too often headless, self-absorbed, and self-loathing. Like so many.

Breasts

In fifth grade my mother forced me to recognize that I am, undoubtedly, a girl. “It’s time for you to get a training bra,” she declared.

I hated the training bra, which pulled at my shoulders, itched my back, produced my first cleavage sweat, and basically “trained” me to fear gravity. Judging by the reactions of

other girls, some of whom were already bragging about their cup size, it became clear that this new discomfort was something that I should be happy about, perhaps even proud of.

My confusion grew along with my breasts. Suddenly I had to upgrade my bra size; I started to want “pretty” bras; I bought sexy bras for my horny first boyfriend who hadn’t even developed armpit hair yet. I wondered about boys’ fascination with what I saw as huge lumps of fat which, placed anywhere else on the body, would be unappealing.

In college, one of my roommates correctly diagnosed that part of my issue with bras was my refusal to admit that I needed a larger size, since I had denied that my breasts had grown from a 38B to a 34C.

Amy and I found a space to talk about the bodies we sometimes feel trapped in. We know women who are afraid to be on top during sex because they can’t stand the image of their breasts flopping around; women who wear two sports bras when exercising to minimize bounce (and those who wear sports bras that deliberately create cleavage); women who hate to take off their miracle bras in front of men because they feel like liars; women who are embarrassed of the stretch marks on their breasts; women who can’t find a shirt that doesn’t feel like a tent because of the magnitude of their chests.

Just when I’d begun to accept my plight as a large-breasted 34C, my breasts grew again. Shortly thereafter, my mother came to visit, and she sensed my denial with this new predicament. So we went bra shopping.

Amusing ourselves in the lingerie section of J.C. Penney’s, we both laughed when my mother held up a D. “There’s no way I could be a D. I could put this thing over my head,” I proclaimed.

“Can I help you ladies out with anything?” A woman with bifocals and “Jean” on her nametag smiled at us.

My mother leaned toward Jean and whispered, “She’s had trouble finding a bra that fits right.”

They both peered at my chest. “How about a fitting?” Jean said brightly. She strung a tape measure around her neck, and we entered the dressing room.

I took off my shirt, held up my arms like a scarecrow, and Jean wrapped the tape around the outside of my bra. “Let’s see. Mm-hmm. Looks like about a 38D. And, what is it you’ve been wearing, hon?”

Deny, deny, deny. “34C.”

“Mm-hmm.” She raised her eyebrows and left, coming back with the bra that could fit over my head. “Try this.”

It was not a bra; it was a brassiere. The underwire was as thick as my finger, and the straps pulled my breasts straight up. Supportive and militaristic. And some idiot thought that putting a little white bow in the center would make this bra sexy or even cute.

I tried to laugh when announcing to my mother that I was buying the bra that could fit over my head. We spent a little time looking for a “pretty” 38D, but soon gave up. At that point I was just grateful that I no longer felt like I was trying to hold up two melons with a flimsy string, so I bought two standard white massives.

Amy once told me that when she was a child, she took a pink marker and drew dots on her Barbie doll’s chest. “Barbie needed nipples,” she had explained. “She just doesn’t look right, you know?”

With that story in mind, I said goodbye to my 34C's, stuffed them into a bag, and mailed them to Amy.

Belly

I've actually heard people say, "No one wants a woman with *no* belly." Pants do not tell me this when I try them on. Pants look up at me and cluck like a disappointed mother. "Aw, pants," I say, "I can never please you."

Beyond my two melon-y breasts is a storage of skin hanging down in two rolls; I call them "Roll A" and "Roll B". I get nauseous at the feeling of my belly folding down its layers when I sit down. I've spouted to my friends that I wish I could slice into my belly and shred off skin like pieces of bread. Sometimes I think that someone shoved one of those mini-basketballs inside of me, or that I've just been pregnant for 23 years.

"Work out," people say. "It feels good." I agree. "It will make you happy with your body." I disagree.

Joannie Greggins, guru of the eighties workout tape called *Joannie Greggins' Super Stomachs*, tells me that the best thing I can do to get rid of "that old tire around the middle" is to suck in my belly all day, the most effective exercise. Suck in, suck in, suck in. Walk to the bus stop. Suck it in. Sit on the red vinyl seats of the bus. Suck it in. Get off the bus – after about ten minutes, when everything has been centering toward my stomach, I have to release the flab. If I continue to suck in, I will be irritable and clumsy for the rest of the day. Enough. In her videotape, Joannie smiles out from the TV with strained dimples during the last abdominal exercise, and turns her winged hair toward the camera, saying, "That stomach's getting flatter already; keep going!" She's lying.

Crunch, count, vomit, frown, starve.

It puzzles me (in a purely un-scientific way) that people's stomachs can actually get larger when they are starving. When my friend Leda became vegan one summer, her belly bloated up like she was pregnant. She claims she didn't supplement for dairy products, and she hung huge bib overalls on her tiny body to cover up her bloated stomach. Leda's rationale for becoming vegan had more to do with ingesting less than with personal ethics. When Leda told me about her bloated stomach that summer, she had dyed her hair a bright yellow, and I kept glancing from that blinding yellow to the dull, sallow yellow of her skin.

Leda is tiny, and she is constantly at the fitness center trying to become tinier. I hate running on the treadmill next to her because I'm afraid that she'll suddenly stop functioning. I picture her body dropping and slipping around and around the treadmill with the ease of a page torn from *Mademoiselle*.

Once, Leda and I had been running next to each other for about 35 minutes, my body motivated by her will to stay on the treadmill. Leda suddenly stopped running, and I felt her glancing at me as I ran beside her. When I, giant, looked over, Leda, tiny, spoke. "You work out too much. Take it easy. You're going to kill yourself." Black roots were showing beneath her yellow hair as she looked at me with concerned, pale eyes. I shrugged off her comment, breathed out, "No I'm not," and kept running, fighting off the urge to leap from the treadmill and shake her. When Leda left, I stared at the wall and thought, She's *the one with the problem. Not me. Not me. Not me. Right?*

I have extra skin. It's really there. I see it. I don't know what Leda sees when she looks in the mirror, but I see that her tiny body is withering to a sick yellow bone. I wonder which one of us is sicker.

Butt

The horrid thing about mirrors is that narcissists can focus on too many things. Sometimes I stand sideways and try to push my breasts in with one hand, suck in my belly, and push down on my huge butt with the other hand.

My butt is genetically cursed. For years, my mother's side of the family has handed down a round butt that causes a strange arch in the back and a heavy walk. We call it the "Glasco Butt," after my Great-Grandma Glasco, a supposed old grouch with a huge butt.

The women in my family laugh at our Glasco Butts. We call them watermelons. We joke about whether or not we could balance trays of ladyfingers or cucumber sandwiches on our butts at cocktail parties. My mother and I laugh when we accidentally bump butts while getting ready in the bathroom or cooking dinner. (My brother is bitter because he thinks he has inherited a woman's butt.)

I've always felt that I could really do something about my breasts or my stomach, if I could just work out a little harder, or stop eating bread, or make a ritual of fasting a few days a week. But my butt is a genetic lump that I don't expect to change. My breasts and stomach grow and deflate and develop stretch marks as I age and lose and gain, but the Glasco Butt is an imp that perches behind me, and it's not going anywhere.

Still, I try. Besides Joannie Greggins and her super stomach, I am acquainted with exercise guru Jaime Brenkus of *8 Minute Buns*. Jaime smiles with glaring white teeth and

bright blue spandex when he claims that his exercises are “guaranteed to burn the buns.”

They are indeed flaming at the end of eight minutes. And, during each of his carefully contrived exercises, Jaime insists, “They’re safe, they’re effective, *and* they’re fun.”

I now have a steel Glasco Butt.

Self-Portrait(s)

Perhaps I am not really self-absorbed. Like the figure in Beth’s painting, my head is, in fact, gone, and the only thing I am absorbed with is the way the rest of my body fits into an image entirely outside of myself.

Not all people who stare into mirrors are vain. Some are just nauseated, or tired, or searching for impossible images. Some of us can’t help a daily mind-bruising.

I am grateful that the headless woman in Beth’s painting hangs on the west wall of my bedroom. She sees me when I glare at my breasts, when I try to flatten my stomach with my hands, and when I smirk at my butt.

She knows when I have been sitting straight-backed, feeling flaps of skin roll over each other beneath my shirt. She knows about my silent condemnation after stepping out of the shower and forcing myself to look as patches of my body become visible in the steamy mirror.

A nail was already peeking out of the plaster when I moved here, as if the headless woman already knew where she wanted to be. The body stands and shadows herself, circling her vagina with yellow. I paint invisible heads for the figure every day. The heads look different each time. And I often wonder what my head is doing on my shoulders.

I think about my body every day. Every day I look at my body. Sometimes I do look inside my head, and I know that my perceptions of myself are not quite right. But most of the time I am head-less.



PART THREE: DISFIGURES

FOOD CHAINS

She thought it was funny when Eddie
would stick out his gut
and say he was pregnant
then suck it back in so his ribs
hung down like stalactites
over a cavern
and say he was an Ethiopian.
Michael Jackson and Stevie Wonder
were singing "We Are The World"
and they finished every bite
because foreign people were starving
and they thought no American could go hungry.

She calls it bad now,
never dreamed up her stalactites –
never thought she'd step from the shower
swipe steam off the mirror
stand sideways and watch
patches of skin become visible.
She wonders how a girl like her
can look like Eddie when he was fooling.



MASTURBATION

(when I tried it today)
all I could do was lie on the carpet
I couldn't even think of the right-sized object
I tried once more to lose my disgust
I tried to remember the parts of me
 (comfort in imagination)
 (no one ever spoke of that)
just how the corners of our mouths cracked
getting our heads pushed in a lap
but I didn't cry I tried to keep
lie-ing and self-rejoicing this body
and wondering what it might look like
really, to me



MOTHER, DAUGHTER, BABY

I. Mother


Mother knew about these things,
these cautionary tales of being with child,
so she sewed cotton nightgowns
with velcro sleeves and waited.

II. Daughter

When the obstinate fetus pushed with water,
a doctor sewed up the cervix tightly.
Bacteria, festering on canal walls,
clutched greedy handfuls of the water bag,
floundering upstream into the womb, with the fetus.
Germs and fetus grew together, expanded, developed,
infected, and pushed at the stitches.
Doctor asked for a urine sample.
As she wiped, her fingers felt a tangled mass,
much like a fragmented cerebrum,
but more like the knotted umbilical cord,
pushing through stitches like an accusing finger
that shakes out its disappointment.
The cord was slimy, rubbery, mostly tangled,
twining its way to its mother's hand.
She kicked over the cup,
piss splotching the floor,
underwear slipping off the backs of her heels,
stumbled to the nurse in fragments of language,
with palm covering the cord.
The nurse shoved her hand up the birth canal
to secure the too-soon baby.
They ripped off the nightgown's velcro sleeves
on the way to the frantic delivery room,
to sever her stomach and pacify the baby,
the baby who had no workable lungs,
the baby who learned oscillated breath,
whose lacerated liver freakishly healed.
Mother watched her baby,
smaller than a gerbil.
She wrote in a hazy journal
of her husband's palm engulfing
her baby's pod-machine.

III. Baby

The baby breathed.
And the baby breathed.
Air pockets on her lungs expanded
like suffocating balloons.
She deflated them.
The baby breathed sterility,
with other babies who couldn't stand
the monotonous walls of the womb.
Some stopped breathing, anyway,
regardless of accusatory cords,
flung through the birth canal.



TWO LIPS

Are two lips enough to speak out a tale?
 our mothers asked when we were asleep.
 Back then blue lights in closets haloed
 the heads of our mothers as they stood
 and wept while we slept in dreams
 of purple flowers
 of filtered sunshine
 of wrinkled puppies
 with hopes that two lips told
 might spring us over
 night terrors in beds of disorder

When we open lips to drip the tell
 the tale rubs together
 breathes without stitches –
 and tongued by the tip of the
 smallest peak of sighs
 our tale lies

When will we tell of this tale with each lip?
 sliding im-motion over the drag of nails,
 un-pared, over abdomens breathing
 up and down

When can we tell?
 un-fear the skew
 and rid our heads
 of noise
 of speech
 of sickness
 inherent in rash bitten words

When? we'll lie on each other's stomachs
 and listen closely to heartbeats to make
 sentences and fragments dissolve
 so our lips might fold together in silence
 which might be good and
 won't be so golden



CLEARING TO THE SPACE

you missed when my ears spread wide and
when my face split right down the middle,
blossoming shards of glass.

You sure missed me then. Sure did.
baby doesn't have to watch you dent
and hate
or love
your jesus you made for your sake

I'm carving out this hole with a spade
where stalactites hang and poke
the red cushion that remains –
voluptuous core of cavern –
It is. It sure is.

baby didn't grow in that cavern
you poked her before she knew
I convulsed her out of edged rocks
she plummeted her own abyss
She did. She sure did.

I keep carving at this cavern
to see if she's gone for good.
She is. She sure is.




PRESENTATIONAL ABORTION

I procured all sentiment
in this meshed bloody sac
that I give to you,
your outstretched palms
spokes of lie-rays.

The sac evolved below my anus
not quite a hemorrhoid
but ballooning til it hung
and swayed
and stoned me straggling down to stumble
(7 years)

One dream lost me from its growth
interrupting and re-instating a virgin
reluctan-cy when it nightmared me
to wake me up to sick vomit you.
I think of egg shells, Valvoline, red wrinkled rubbers
hanging from me for
(7 years)

An albatross slung from my ass,
and no smiling fortuna to frighten me to life.
Stretch marks and withering knuckles I present
in this bloody sac conceived by we
and swayed for
(7 years)
by me.



EVE

I will tell you as coarse –
a salty sludge like mucus
your poking tongue all bumps
from the way you devour scorching morsels
flicking in and out like a serpent.
And how you cheated me into believing
that I should eat green apples
because sour makes me pucker up.
And how you made my mouth sore
 you're
an arrowhead spear, pointing-jabbing.
I'll tell about your hammer toes
how when they cricked and cramped
I kneaded them, working your callused skin.
I'll say I disliked your jags
the way you distorted when I recalled
you back to loathe and lurk.



WHISPERED

because.
 if you know about female circumcision
 (the four ways)
 you might relate your knowledge, spewing
 the distinctions between a nerve-filled flap
 and a miniature penis.
 if you know all of this
 perhaps you can speak of cleanliness
 and eat it up in gobs of trickling water
 because.
 just because you know
 you might report your knowledge, shouting
 a curator of marginal pieces
 a mouth detached from storytelling
 list the cut- and sewn-up facts
 the pencil-tip hole, the inner scrape
 and the 15 minutes of life it takes
 to emit the typical human waste
 because.
 if you know about female mutilation
 (all the ways)
 you might sit up, erect,
 close off that pain
 explain
 perhaps you will understand the scalpel
 the shape of female plasticity
 manipulated skin
 because.
 just because
 you know.



INTERRUPTION

juncos –

buzzsaw –

Lift it over hair spread from bed like yarn

and hurl

buzzsaw –

toward brimming wastebin

of hands and feet

and brains take

pages of vigilant words

and funnel

words on paper like

magic realist

really cylindrical

really words now bark

with mussy nests like

peace diffused in flapping oaks

for further seconds than time –



PART FOUR: STORIES

HABANERO GARDEN

Granny tells me that what she heard through the half-opened window that day was Grandpa's knees diveting the soft earth. But I think she heard the clatter of his spade against one of the cages supporting his ripening tomatoes. I don't really know what happened in those moments. I almost fainted, I laughed, somehow I made it outside, I puked, I watched Granny because I didn't know what else to do. But I knew if I tried to stop her as she reacted to Grandpa's third and final heart attack in the garden, she would detest me, and I knew, somehow, that I couldn't be a part of her kind of mourning.

Schlip-schlip-schlip.

It started with Granny's knobby knuckles wobbling back and forth as she sliced habaneros like little deformed pumpkins, bright orange and bumpy. I coughed with habanero burn in my throat, fumbling in latex gloves.

Grandpa was bent down in the backyard garden, inspecting the plump of his tomatoes, pressing thick fingers to them, pulling out weeds, shaking his head because of the drought and the thick green and white slugs that had found their way to *his* tomatoes. His short nasal whistles filtered through the kitchen screens with the blanket heat of the day.

Heat filled my throat and wrapped itself inside of me. Suffocating humidity was pocketing my skin so that my sweat stood in dots on my upper lip and back. Granny didn't speak; she wasn't even sweating. She put stray seeds in her mouth and schlippped away with her knife.

Grandpa whistled in with an armful of tomatoes. He piled them on the table and grinned at me, putting his hands in the pockets of his stained overalls. The tomatoes were for me to salt and eat like apples. He knew I wanted to be outside.

Granny spit seeds into the sink and motioned toward the peppers. “Want one, Ben?”

His lips curled and he shook his head, grabbing an apple from the counter. “Nope.” Flipping open a pocketknife, he cut big chunks of white, turning over the blade and tossing bites in his mouth. “Those things’ll burn your insides clear out.”

“Now you *know* they cleanse. That’s good.” Schlip-schlip-schlip.

Grandpa pointed his knife sternly toward the warm, yellow-red pile of tomatoes, still slightly green at the tops. “*That’s* what keeps you going, Delia.”

Granny smirked and clucked her tongue as she cut, then piled more habaneros on my cutting board. Grandpa perched on a kitchen stool, paring his fingernails with his pocketknife. He coughed from pepper fumes, waved his hand. When he finished with his nails, he began to slough dead skin from his arm with the blade. He whistled and tossed the browning apple core into the trash can on his way out.

I wanted to go outside with him and press bare fingers to the red skin of beefsteak tomatoes, watch the plopped imprints fade with the recovering skin.

Granny clattered dishes into the sink. Not much longer. I kept chopping. The sound of water, as she tested the temperature with a steady finger, was like an anvil pushing on the heat surrounding us – the peppers, sweat, breath. I get weird about sensory overload, and a nausea and dizziness creeps upon me at the worst times. It was the heat and the thinking and

every tick, every motion, every momentary change. It was happening again. Nausea. I put down the knife.

“Granny – I’ve gotta quit for a minute.” She would want more than that. My mother would have put a cold washcloth to my forehead and let me sit until my muscles ached from lack of motion.

Granny’s hands had stopped moving. Water and dishes weren’t sloshing. She had marvelously sharp hearing; she wasn’t listening to me.

“Granny –“

“Quiet, Elizabeth.”

My head felt like bees were prodding it with dull stingers. It was hot. Granny’s ear got closer to the window and I could hear her breath quicken before she put up a knobby knuckle and tapped at the glass. What if I fainted? She wasn’t even looking at me. My knife clattered from the cutting board to the floor as I leaned against the counter for balance. Then Granny sprinted away. The screen door slapped the frame and my ears and I imagined Granny’s long legs pounding on the porch and I laughed and I wondered why I was laughing.

*

Granny had put instructions for CPR beneath a Vernon Memorial Hospital magnet on the refrigerator after Grandpa’s first attack, and she had memorized these instructions in order to perform them mechanically at the first sign of distress. And she did, like a robot, but she failed. Grandpa died almost instantly. I must have known he was dead because as I came around to the backyard, I saw her trying CPR and heard her say, “Don’t go cold, Ben, Don’t go cold,” and I vomited heat, burning salt.

I called the paramedics. When I ran around the corner of the house again, she was closing his lips and then falling, face-first, beside him. Flat, digging her knees into the earth like he had been doing. Her mussed grey hair flopped while she moved her head around. Something stopped me from running to her. Maybe fear. Maybe the knowledge that if I stopped my Granny, if I tried to stop her, she would find a way to truly loathe me.

I stood there like a dunce watching my Granny go crazy, until the paramedics pulled Granny's face from the ground. Her arms crooked up like a scarecrow over their supporting arms.

She spat dirt from cracking lips and announced, "I heard his knees."

*

I slept in her living room – Granny on the sofa, me on the floor – for a few weeks after Grandpa's funeral. Sometimes Mom stayed over, folding out Grandpa's blue recliner and snoring diligently. Otherwise, the chair was odd and empty, faint blinks imprinted with Grandpa's time-worn sitting posture. At night, I waited for it to rock or creak. Granny would leave the television on with no sound, ovaling mouths and unscribed movements gaping at me with the hourly songs from her bird clock. Granny's sleeping pills immediately knocked her out. She laid quietly on her side with lips parted, sometimes forming soundless sentence fragments.

When I went back to sleeping in the duplex Mom and I share in town, I thought of Granny in that house, alone. I wondered when she would move back to their bed – if she'd sleep on one side, if she'd turn and expect his body to be warm beside her, if she'd spread herself widely in the middle of the bed and try to forget.

*

On a Saturday morning in early January, Mom woke me for breakfast. Chewing quickly on a bagel and waiting for a fax to arrive, she told me to go “spend time” with Granny and to mention the possibility of a pet. I couldn’t imagine Granny stroking a purring cat in her lap.

When I pulled in the driveway, the front door was open, thwacking against the house. I plunged a hand into my pocket and searched for pepper spray, shivering. Old woman – alone – dead husband. Someone had raped and pillaged my grandmother’s house, surely.

As I walked up the sidewalk to the house, I glimpsed Granny hunched in the garden, prodding furiously at the ground with a metal spade. Her grey-dotted nightgown only came to her knees, and it looked as if she had cut the bottom with kitchen shears, so that it flipped around like teeth in the wind.

“She must be overdosed, Liz.” Mom said this on the phone while I cried that I was scared, to come over now, right now, *now*. “We’ll take her to the hospital. Get her inside, out of the cold.”

I expected there to be a struggle involving possible lesions from her spade. But Granny smiled at me, pulled on the slacks I brought out for her, and came inside. She asked me to make witch-hazel tea to soothe her stomach. I pulled out the corked jar of crushed tabascos next to the stove, and peeked at her legs crossed in Grandpa’s chair as I added emetic herb and witch hazel leaves to hot water.

Stirring the tea, she inhaled tabasco warmth.

“Mmm...like a river. Warm. Tumbling.”

Mom's car door slammed outside.

We caught Dr. Cunningham at Vernon Memorial Hospital before he went home for the afternoon. My distaste for this man began with his relatively young receding hairline and twisted ears. He'd been "talking" with Granny since Grandpa died two months ago. Granny just called him "the doctor," and Mom had instructed me not to refer to him as a "therapist" or "psychiatrist."

"Denial," Dr. Cunningham called it when Granny completely stopped talking about Grandpa. My distaste grew deeper with this man's sterile, procedural descriptions, as if someone could really separate loss into process.

Granny smiled passively at Dr. Cunningham as we sat in an office infested with leather seating and important frames. In the hallway, Dr. Cunningham spoke in a low voice to my mother. He said it was time to put Granny in the psychiatric ward, where she would have drug treatment. "It's possible that she's in the beginning stages of Alzheimer's," he said with ice cube authority.

My lips sputtered. "No she's not. That's bullshit." Mom's fingers clamped around my wrist and she shook her head once.

Dr. Cunningham ignored me and gazed just past my mother's ear. "I'm so sorry. I'm going to sign the papers. Again, I apologize." Mom's fingers loosened. "But right now, ladies, I need to leave for a surgery. One of my partners, Dr. Richards, will help you from this point." He smiled noncommittally and was gone.

My jeans squeaked on a brown leather chair in Dr. Cunningham's office, while Mom visited a desk to sign papers admitting Granny to the psych ward. I pushed at brassy buttons imprinted in the chair's arms and watched Granny's veins jumping in hands folded complacently on lemon-colored slacks. My tongue had become pasty and slow, as if I were driving by a mangled car wreck with my mouth agape. I watched her lips, primly demure, stapled easily like paper to her face.

"Granny, it'll be all right." I hoped for something in my thickened tone to wake her, so we could both laugh at this ludicrousness, link arms and leave.

She didn't look at me and, again, speechless paste perched on my tongue.

The new doctor, brown hair gelled and parted, entered, followed by Mom, who eyed me deliberately. She had a smatter of mascara beneath her eyes, the only indication of her guilt.

The doctor nodded at me and bent in front of Granny as if he were about to offer her an oversized lollipop. She gazed down at him without moving any facial muscles. "Well, hello, Mrs. Gabriel, I'm Dr. Richards. Now that Dr. Cunningham has explained our need to observe you for a while, we'll go ahead and put you up in your new place."

He was a jumbled mix of an intern and an innkeeper. Granny blinked then rose when he held out his hand.

We followed Dr. Richards and Granny, his white coat fluttering against her legs. Behind Granny, my lips began to shake and Mom pulsed her fingers against my hand reassuringly. I didn't look at her.

We took an elevator that smelled like mashed crackers to the sixth floor, turning into a long hallway with light blue paint bubbling and ready to peel. At the end of the hallway, Dr. Richards picked up a phone beside a grey door.

And Granny came out of her cloud, snapping up her head and frowning her eyebrows at Dr. Richards, who said, “Yes, I’m here with Delia Gabriel. Yes. Dr. Cunningham. Yes. OK.”

The door made a quiet buzz and click, and Dr. Richards pulled gently on Granny’s arm while pushing down the handle. Her feet snagged a bit on the thinly carpeted hallway, and then her mouth began to open, a misshapen circle, and she gasped.

“No, sir. No. What is this, happening? No.” Her voice cracked and I thought of what it would be like to throw a porcelain vase at this man’s perfect hair.

Dr. Richards parted his lips calmly and smiled, a robot with crooked teeth. “It’s all right, Mrs. Gabriel. Come with me, and I’ll show you to your room.”

I was sweating. I had to fade behind Mom, staring at the pinstripes on the back of her fitted shirt. Sweating. A young man plodded just beyond the doorway in pink slippers and stained, loose clothing, holding a paper cup. No one else was visible. He stopped and dropped his bottom lip down, staring. The back of my head was prickly.

Granny craned her head back, her eyes bulging in recognition at my mother. “What. I hate this. You. What.”

I don’t know if she saw me. I backed up and put my palms against the bubbled paint of the wall, feeling it crack under my weight. Closing my eyes, I heard her shoes scuff the carpet more. I started to sink down, but my knees gave out just as the door clicked shut.

*

There was a visiting room with tables, chairs, striped couches, a television set, and a baby grand piano. Two men played slow ping pong at the table in the corner, arcing the ball high in the air and watching it plick back up to the chipped table surface. Granny busied her hands, watching her fingers pull and twist thread as she sewed buttons on random shirts, a small pile next to her.

“Your grandmother has really helped out the staff.” The nurse’s face was shiny like plastic, a shell of too much tanning and layers of base one shade darker than her real skin. I didn’t know if I should smile.

“Yeah.” I sat across from Granny, clopping my fingers down at the table. “Hi, Granny.”

“I’m *mad* at this.” Her fingers sewed faster as she concentrated on the needle.

“I know. Me too.” I didn’t know what to say to her. I wondered if we could make a swift sprint out of here. I knew she could run – I’d seen it.

“They put me down *there*.” She stopped sewing long enough to point toward a long hallway. A woman older than Granny was leaning against the wall with one heel propped up like a stork. She saw me staring down the hallway and screeched loudly, “Hellooo dear!” I pulled up superficial lip corners.

“Crazy people. All trying to talk.” Granny was looking at me now. “Mad.” She nodded a firm chin, once up, once down.

“Yeah.” The ping pong bounced past us, plicking on tile.

“I’m going to my room.” She finished sewing a brown button to the cuff of a pale blue shirt and scooted her chair back. “Bye now.”

One of the men sidled past me as if I were a live wire, the hem of his pants sliding against the floor. Granny stood and gazed down the hallway, touching the grey spots that were clumped in the back of her hair.

“Wait. Can I see your room, Granny?”

“No.” She began to walk, her loose brown pants slacking out in the legs. “Bye now.”

This was a phrase she used with me when I was a child. Mom would make me call Granny every Sunday to “talk,” even though I saw her practically every day while Mom worked. Granny would sigh, hand the phone to Grandpa – who would fumble with a few awkward questions and hand the phone back –, and declare, “All right. Bye now.”

Click. Goodbye. Right now.

“At least she’s honest,” Mom would laugh when I complained that I couldn’t engage Granny in any sort of conversation. I wondered what merited Mom’s laden chuckle.

“Bye now.”

This time I ignored her request, following her, and the woman who had screeched at me folded her arms in keen interest, leering. “Granny –“

She turned back around. “Tell your mother she put me here. Bye now.”

*

Mom made me get up at 7:30 and we drove to Granny’s house. “We’re getting everything out.”

I didn’t really understand what she meant and I didn’t ask her.

When we got to Granny's house, Mom began to open every drawer and scour every shelf, pulling bottles of medication from under stacked bills and from behind rows of glasses. We found every bottle of pills in the house. Mom put Granny's sleeping pills and Prozac in her purse. She then proceeded to throw Grandpa's old heart pills and irrelevant stuff like Bayer and even cough syrup into the trash can, which she had dragged to the middle of the kitchen linoleum.

I found a bottle of peppermint schnapps and showed it to her. "It's your grandfather's. He took it to ward off colds." She emptied it into the sink and threw it away.

The house was too quiet, deactivated from Granny's consistent bustle and Grandpa's whistle. Framed photographs of Grandpa had multiplied – on the walls, leaning next to a lamp, on the coffee table – with each week since his death. There was a picture of him in a black suit with a blue striped tie, under the trellis where his roses bloomed every year. His hands were behind his back while his stomach jutted out, in pain at the whole process of posing. Granny enlarged the photo for an 8x10 frame, which made his stomach larger and the rest of his body more blurred. The frame sat on the TV next to a glass jar filled with dried rose petals from his casket.

Mom instructed me to put the trash bag, filled with medication, into the trunk of the car so we could dispose of it at home. The plastic bottles plinked together with my steps, and I glanced quickly toward the garden out back and shivered. Granny would start the garden once she got out of the hospital. I'd have to cover up images of my grandfather dying and my grandmother freaking out in the dirt.

The neighbor's dog, Misty, tied to their garage across the street, startled me with a fierce shout. "Oh, you know me. Shut up." She wagged a fluffy tail and barked again, baring her teeth. "Jesus."

Inside, Mom was holding the 8x10 of Grandpa, shaking her head. "This is an *awful* picture. I don't know what she's thinking. All these pictures. It's too much."

"Well, geez, 54 years is a long time."

Mom put the photo back, glanced at me, and started to cry.

We left the house with old medication and all of Grandpa's clothes. In the car, Mom said, "We'll give the clothes to Goodwill."

"I want his bibs," I told her. Then I thought about the work overalls hanging in my closet, the smell of dirt that was ingrained to the rivets of his palms. "No I don't."

Mom glanced over at me. "I'll save them for you."

*

When Granny was released, she came with us without a word. The hallway was quiet when we left. One man bounced a ping pong ball up and down.

In the car, I turned the radio to a popular station and nobody complained, so I sang along under my breath. Mom drove. I glanced in the rearview mirror every few minutes. Granny's eyes concentrated on a space beyond her vision.

When Granny unlocked her front door, I checked to make sure Mom was still behind me. She was climbing the front steps, carrying a few pies that the Baptist church down the road had sent for Granny.

I turned back, and the door slammed in my face.

For a second, I wondered whether or not the white pies in Mom's hands would drop to the layer of snow on the porch. Granny hates white pie. "Too sweet," she says.

Mom and I stared at each other briefly.

Granny had disappeared when we came inside. Already, all the kitchen cupboards were open. We heard the slide of closet doors. Mom put the pies on the counter, and no one spoke for a long time.

*

Mom assigned me to bring Granny her medication, after Dr. Cunningham stressed the importance of regulating her pill intake. Granny was obviously offended, though curiously quiet, about this latest act of humiliating control. We established a pattern quickly.

Each evening Granny and I engage in an ownership game, in which Granny manages to take the pills in seemingly perfect control over her circumstances. I come to Granny's house when my classes are over. At 5pm I unzip my backpack to retrieve the plastic baggie with the correct amount of pills in it. Granny has a still glass of water ready when I hand her the baggie. We don't speak – the cardinal at the 5:00 slot on her bird clock ends its shrill song as Granny opens the baggie and takes three pills – white, yellow, pink – one at a time, swallowing each with a swift gulp of water.

I've discovered that I feel most comfortable standing with my palm supported against the counter, unmoving until Granny smoothly flicks the rest of the water into the sink, washes the glass, dries it with a linen towel, and places it upside down on the shelf where it came from.

Then we speak. Granny informs me of her latest project, which then becomes *our* latest project.

*

Since Grandpa died two years ago, Granny hasn't stopped moving. At Vernon Memorial Hospital, Granny sews teddy bears together out of discarded cloth pieces that smell like mothballs. Sometimes I help her. She drives everywhere, running errands and volunteering. For a while, she took classes for widowers forced upon her by Dr. Cunningham, but she says she was bored with them and that, frankly, she doesn't care about helping other people heal in a warm, sharing circle.

Today I'm picking up Granny at the hospital because her car is in the shop for new brake hoses. Granny heard the effects of the cracked hoses before the brakes started grinding. The mechanic at the shop told her there was nothing wrong, but she persisted until he found what she had heard.

She's been sewing all day. I dropped her off at the hospital before my 9:30 communications class at Wren Lake Community College, and it's 4:30 now. She's sewing a button eye onto a calico bear, her fingers quick.

"Are you ready?"

"Just a minute." Her fingers deftly push a piece of thread into the eye of her needle, and she sews on the bear's other eye in seconds.

Back home, in her kitchen, she tells me that we're canning peppers this evening, like we've been doing since I was eight – cutting, canning, crushing and sealing, stringing, mashing for white oak barrels in the basement.

We cut so long that my left eye itches. If I scratch, little bonfires will erupt and smolder around my eye in a perfect circle. I learned early that acid from hot peppers will burn on my skin for days, even clamping onto the skin beneath my fingernails. I had to figure out for myself that I needed gloves.

Granny slices habaneros with her bare hands and sucks on seeds as if they are ice cubes.

“In Louisiana, *nobody* wants to pick tabascos. But I picked them all the time when I was little. With my bare hands. I could pick bushels without flinching. They haven't made a machine yet that can pick such tiny things without damaging or missing a lot of them. And *nobody* wants to work in tabasco fields.”

Granny tells me this story if my eyes are sealed shut from burning or my hands are plunged in baking soda and water. I've tried to imagine an impervious child version of her, arrogantly picking tabascos, perhaps grinning and popping a few in her mouth. Her hands must have always been thick, like Grandpa's, her veins squiggled branches coated in unmoving bark. It makes me wonder about the implications of this woman who could grasp joy in the searing heat of a pepper field. And I wonder if my thin skin will always be incomparable to Granny's hermetic thickness.

She doesn't belong here. She's simply too hot for this place.



RUBBER KNIVES

We were having pot roast simmered in carrot rings and potato slices. She watched me, running her teeth across her fork – that screech that makes my own teeth rattle. Her hazel eyes focused directly on my chewing jaws. Now, I knew that she was about as interested in the motion of my jaws as I pretend to be when her sister comes over and they screech gossip.

My wife is creative – she always has been, which is how all of this started.

She began to fold her thick linen napkin. This napkin has no real use in the meticulously clean hands of my wife, but she always lays it in her lap, even if she's eating a celery stick. She pushed aside her plate, smoothed her napkin flat on the table, and folded it twice in a perfect square. Then she smiled, her teeth barely peeking past her lips. "Honey?"

I was still chewing, and a stringy piece of roast stuck in my throat. "What?"

She sighed. "You know, I came up with a great idea today."

"Really?" I took a long drink of water and felt the meaty string start to slither down.

"What?"

"Sex."

"OK." Usually, we were both ready for that, and I wondered why she was asking.

She took a quick sip of water and cleared her throat. "No, I mean a *different* kind of sex."

"Well, you know I'm open to different positions, honey."

"That's not it." She clasped her hands on the tabletop. "Think about this. We're married, right?" I nodded. "And we're married, just to each other, just us, for the rest of our lives."

“Uh, yes. Like we agreed to be.” I braced myself for a divorce request. And, why not? I’m a boring man. Suddenly, I knew I should have been more insistent to my wife about the lack of excitement in my life.

“So we’re never going to be this intimate with anyone else so I was thinking we could dress up like different people when we do it.” She burst the idea out so quickly she had to suck in for breath when she finished.

“What?”

“You know, like role-playing.”

I felt the last bit of that stringy piece of roast finally inching down and a shiver of revulsion in my spine. “I don’t get it. You mean you don’t like to be with me?”

She put her fingers across her mouth and cheeks, threads of skin peeking at me.

“Honey, that’s not what I mean.” My wife looked down. “Can’t we just try it?”

*

Like I said, my wife is creative. She certainly didn’t go for the nurse/doctor or French maid/butler bit. One of her most impressive concepts was a gay nun from Australia meeting up with a Canadian jockey in a humidor. She bought cigars and even coached me on my Australian dialect so I could moan a few blasphemous phrases with my habit flapping as my jockey rode me harder in the stifling air.

It was fine at first, exciting even. My wife’s eyes are always changing from a light blue to a dark green and, whenever she would relate her latest intrigue, her plan would absorb and swim in deep green pools. And she really enjoyed it. Her orgasm rate doubled, maybe even tripled.

But I soon found that there was a problem. One evening, just after my wife had stripped off my spandex pants, I looked more closely at her eyes, which were made brighter by the complimenting puff of her pink tutu. They were a blue so light that I couldn't find life in them, as if they had swallowed themselves up back to her brain – where everything that was happening had nothing, absolutely nothing, to do with me. Despite my inevitable role, I wasn't there, with her. She didn't even notice that time when I stopped moving, distracted by the paleness in her eyes.

And I believe it was this realization of my absence in my own marriage that provoked me to start writing.

My wife doesn't write and has never written. She hardly reads. She tries, but she falls asleep in the middle of books or stops reading them with the first hint that she'll become bored. I've tried to explain to her that a good many books are going to bore the hell out of you before you get past the introductory bunk, like phlegm before renewed health, but she's remained unconvinced.

So, I was certain that she wouldn't be interested in *my* great idea. And, I thought, fantasies are meant to exclude, a type of inverted frenzy. My wife didn't want *me* in a hastily-sewn habit, groaning beneath her. So maybe some part of me didn't want *her*. I wasn't afraid that our marriage was going to die. I was afraid that *I* was going to die. Of absence. I guess that people who want to be somewhere new find a way to leave. But I didn't want something new. I wanted myself.

The first step I took was to wedge myself in front of the computer, as if fantasy lives can have greater value than my wife's legs, warm and wrapped over my belly. I just started

typing, not even looking at the monitor, just letting my fingers fly. I'm not exactly sure why it was writing above all else that captured me (although the relative lack of motion involved with writing is appealing after your wife has just fucked you silly), but writing was all spew for a while. I wrote about things like the sound of my wife's voice (not *her*, her voice) echoing up the stairwell while she was on the phone. I typed about Polish sausage. I reflected upon my dead adolescent friend Mick who fell from a double ferris wheel after swinging too hard.

But my real pleasure with writing came with the conception of Danielle, a beautiful girl who sprang into my life as if she had just been leaping through meadows of golden sun. My fingers, pulling my blinking eyes down to static keyboard letters, discovered Danielle first, and I swear there was a tingling in my tips before I actually raised my eyes to widen at the product on screen. She was hot, of course – a languorous construction of soft limbs and natural lashes and unruly perfected hair.

That first day, when she came to me, I began to observe her life. I also ran into my first conflict with her. She wouldn't let me be completely inside of her, my own fantasy. I stuck around, anyway.

She was sitting on the steps of a battered old clubhouse smoking a Winston. I expected at least a Marlboro Light bummed from a boyfriend or perhaps a Virginia Slim. But there she was, like one of those unconscious personalities that rear themselves up before you understand how they could have existed inside of you.

She gazed coolly at me, a thin layer of abdomen peeking from a fitted black T-shirt with the number 19 in wet red splattered on cotton. She was thin, a waif, but I noticed her size

ten feet and the way her back curved so her ass jutted out like a medium-sized watermelon. And when I got closer, she opened pouty lips and the dissipating smoke revealed a jumble of unruly white teeth. She said, “Danielle.” Then the smoke became thick in front of my face and my fingers halted on the keyboard.

These brief appearances were all I had for a while, often at inopportune moments, away from the keyboard. Danielle would swivel her hips up my sidewalk while I was grabbing the morning paper, and I’d have to skip my 7am coffee to jumpstart the keyboard with my fingers. In one instance, she floated around pot roast on my wife’s carrot rings, soft and simmering, until my wife began to fold her napkin to reveal her latest scheme, so that Danielle had to blur for a while.

She always came back. She began to seduce me for hours, she and this gang of stupid boys she hung around with. And I began to wonder why she was stuck in my head in the first place.

Human beings, in general, want their stories to be told, as if we should all be eternal Christmas gifts, wrapped in a glistening bow and anticipated on a cold morning. I sat around a lot in my study upstairs and tried to figure these things out. I could go hours without typing a single word.

My wife never asked me why I spent so much time at the computer; in fact, she seemed content with my disappearances. Downstairs, she would busy herself with projects like pruning plants, framing photos, or developing her latest set of roles. If I came down for coffee or a snack, she’d smile and turn back to the matter at hand. Occasionally, we’d kiss, and I would taste the soft salt of skin on her lips.

Soon, Danielle revealed that she had a boyfriend named Jake Oser. Jake was one of those black leather and half-goth enigmas with pierced ears and long dark eyelashes. According to Danielle, Jake had nests of hair all over his body, and she loved to grasp patches of it.

Both Danielle and Jake lived in a cluster of houses known as Appleton, in the country. The cluster used to be a village before the government took away their post office. Many people who lived just five miles from Appleton were unaware of its existence. In the cluster of houses lived a cluster of families whose parents were all relatively the same age and had children in relatively the same decades, which produced, of course, the inherent human capacity to stick with whoever was around, a unit of friendship.

With this in mind, I wondered why Danielle didn't feel stuck. Vibrant girls shouldn't feel stuck. They should read *The Bell Jar*, get angry, and leave town. But Danielle wouldn't leave, even though her feminist and out of place mother probably had some Plath lying around. Danielle stayed. She never told me why.

Even though I wondered if my wife knew about Danielle, her disinterest in my nightly office hours made this unlikely. My writing and the lovely Danielle were within a few easy clicks, anyway.

Danielle knew about the carefully constructed creativity of my marriage, but she still insisted that my life was boring. Danielle also called me "the peeping tom" of her life simply because she perceived my real life to be so utterly blase. I told her that *she* was *my* character, which meant that every part of my being a bore might reflect as much about her as anything else. She didn't listen. She was too young to listen. And she was too busy.

Danielle and her countryside cohorts, the former Dahinda Rubber Knife Gang turned The Dahinda Manifestation, were trying to write as well. And, according to Danielle, this would be one of the most significant documents *ever*.

“Let’s write a *manifesto*.” It was the most articulate sentence the Dahinda Rubber Knife Gang believed they had heard in their eighteen years of living.

On that cool October night Jake Oser was passing around strawberry-flavored bidis he stole from the front seat of star point guard Steve Quip’s blue Topaz, conveniently unlocked in the Knoxville High School parking lot.

Danielle Hayden is the secretary of the Dahinda Manifestation, and she is in love with Jake Oser.

She made it clear to me that

Jake was the one to first utter that beautiful manifesto concept two years ago.

“You really gotta appreciate the guy, you know, he’s so great. And he’s *hot*.”

I cringed when she referred to that greasy boy as *hot*. Chunks of his hair splayed wildly and pus glinted from new piercings.

But my job was to report whatever Danielle chose to tell me. So I listened to Danielle, as well as read some of her purple, swirly secretarial notes from the meetings of the Dahinda Manifestation.

Again, Danielle came to me when she felt like it. She didn’t consider my feelings – whether or not my wife was Xena Warrior Princess, and was conquering my male chastity

belt or something. My wife's lovely breasts could be swinging over my face and Danielle would talk, blurred and incoherent, from my wife's deep cleavage. And I thought, perhaps, that this was OK because I was Danielle's channel, and she wanted so badly to jump through my rusted medium.

The Dahinda Rubber Knife Gang thought that everything in their somewhat inactive lives would improve when Jake Oser first uttered that sentence, "Let's write a *manifesto*," then sucked on his bidi with his dark eyes half-closed. The way he said "manifesto" was like champagne glasses clinking together in the midst of a grand finale of fireworks.

Well, maybe, maybe not, I felt that simile just then because it sounded pretty smooth like a smooth smooth smoothie or something and it was convincing because Jake Oser was the kind of guy who was filled with artificially poignant phrases that really grabbed his friends, who

had hung out ever since they were seven years old and Dirk's dumbass Dad belched in his lawn chair and said, "What are ya? Some kinda rubber knife gang?"

Danielle thinks that the christening of the Rubber Knife Gang was the only intriguing thing Dirk's dumbass dad offered. Other than that, he was stretching himself out in a lawnchair, scratching his balls, and heckling the Rubber Knife Gang.

But Danielle doesn't remember much about Dirk's dumbass dad. After too much Southern Comfort one night, he went outside to fight the

train. He stood on the tracks and heckled the noisy shuffle of the Burlington Northern as it weaved miles away from Appleton. He heckled as he imagined the conductor relaxing after coming home from Chicago with kids and spraypaint and the ping of bullets on the peeling green and white cars. Dirk's dumbass dad put up his dukes and curled his lips. "I'll fight'cha!! I'll fight-cha!! C'mon, ya fuckin' thing!" As the angry eyes of the train sent a warning message in the form of short bursts that drowned out Dirk's dumbass dad's drunken desperation, Dirk was stumbling home from a shroom stint, coming down just enough to see his dumbass dad's shaking dukes and flying body parts. The train beat him.

But, why Dahinda? Appleton wouldn't do – not enough people knew about Appleton, anyway. Dahinda was the next closest town, it's true, and all it really had over Appleton was a post office and a bed and breakfast. But knowing about Dirk's dumbass dad could help explain why

Dirk kind of brought down the mood, but only for a second, when he said, "What the fuck's a *manifesto*?"

Dirk had inherited some sort of dumbass gene.

But Danielle thought it was perfectly ok not to know what a manifesto was at 18 and she bet I didn't know what it was until I was in college. I was surprised Jake knew. Danielle's mother read her the *SCUM Manifesto* in the womb. Danielle claimed that she heard every scathing word and was born angry. Danielle also claimed that she was no longer angry and was most certainly *not* a feminist. Jake called her mother a "femi-nazi."

My wife had a fleeting interest in the study of radical feminism in the '70s. She has a half-read edition of Solanis' *SCUM Manifesto* on the bookshelf, and I only had to figure out the acronym and read the first three pages to realize that I didn't need to waste time reading about a society for cutting up men.

What mattered about Danielle's mother was that Danielle thought that she was completely dependent upon Jake Oser, and a therapist might have said that Danielle never had a real father figure and maybe her mother's extremist attitude had turned Danielle away from the dark side.

"What the fuck's a *manifesto*?"

Jake didn't answer Dirk's dumbass question. Rather, when Dirk posed the question – a ponderous and formidable question to the fresh brain of an eighteen year old country kid – Jake looked just above Dirk's stickery bedhead and refused to respond to the dumbass nature of the question. Perhaps Jake didn't know the meaning himself. But, most likely, he was waiting for Hogan Poe, the nerdy mysteriously dark intellectual, to get all didactic on Dirk, which he did. "Dude, like the *Communist Manifesto*."

Hogan Poe is the only kid in Appleton who isn't afraid of Danielle's mother. Jake believes that Hogan has "*slept* with the femi-nazi," but Danielle thinks that's ludicrous.

Dirk paused for a long moment with his thin lips drooping dumbly, and tried to process two words that he didn't quite know the meaning of. Jake, growing coolly impatient with Dirk's slow-moving brainwaves, and

wondering if he should read this *Communist Manifesto* before promoting manifestoes to his friends, repeated, “Yeah, dude, like the Communist Manifesto.”

And of course Dirk gave a dumbass response like, “Dude, I ain’t no fuckin’ *commie*.”

I guessed that some kids like to say “Dude” when they’re talking – at least in 1995, in Appleton, Illinois. I also assumed that the meaning of “manifesto” was eventually explained in a clear and precise and smarty-pants manner by Hogan Poe so that each person in the room understood what was going on.

What was going on, as they understood it, was that the Dahinda Rubber Knife Gang was about to undergo a significant change. Thus, they now had to write a tremendous manifesto, as well as change their name because they were all eighteen more or less and Dirk’s dumbass dad was dead so they didn’t have to worry about offending anyone by changing their name which obviously had to resemble the word “manifesto” because that was half the fun and had to still contain the name of the closest recognizable town of 200 people – Dahinda – in order to give their future fans a context, an environment, a setting for this group of talented prodigy manifesto writers. And they all agreed it sounded way more mature than Rubber Knife Gang.

My wife and I mentioned “maturity” frequently when we decided it wasn’t in our best interests to have children (she thought they were “too needy” and she was “too busy”). I used

to put my ear close to my wife's stomach as she shifted and talked in her sleep, and I wondered what it would be like to grow inside of her.

None of our dreams make sense.

None of our dreams make sense.

Thought Dirk, coming out of his pea-mind after a long moment of mouthing "manifesto" with his chapped lips and realizing like a bullet shot straight up in the air what it meant and thinking for a brief second that he was a horrible speller and hated writing. Then he said, "Dudes, what we gonna *manifest* about?"

Jake ignored him and contemplated the little crinkles in the corners of Danielle's eyes, reminding himself to remind her that she'd better consider some surgery so she wouldn't end up with the vicious eye-sneer of her femi-nazi mother.

Dirk leaned against the slaps of wood that served as walls for the Dahinda Rubber Knife Gang clubhouse, and wondered if he had asked the question, or if he had just thought it, a thought that had him thinking long enough to forget what a manifesto was.

But the matter was settled. The manifesto, whatever it was, would become the new redeeming quality of this rough-and-tumble gang.

Rubber knives manifested themselves in the form of literary dreams, the infection of the potentially written word oozing into fresh Appleton minds and perhaps even seeping into the outskirts of Dahinda, who may have felt flattered by the recognition.

Dahinda.

A speck of a real place. I know someone who grew up around there.

A post office. A bed and breakfast. A stop for buffalo burgers during the Scenic Drive (arts and crafts and food piled and canned on tables in every small town in Knox County (real) for two weekends in a row of slow-moving gawking vehicles). A few miles from where the mummified man (real) was found in his own house, two miles from Danielle's house, which gave Sheriff Mark Shearer (real) the chance to be on *Oprah* (real) and discuss how the family of the mummified man was brainwashed by a cult.

A true story. A context. A background.

Growing up, the Dahinda Rubber Knife Gang commuted from Appleton by long morning bus rides to school in Knoxville, the nearest (real) and "friendly" town, according to the sign placed just beyond the East End Tavern. "Kluxville," according to the rest of Knox County, really.

Really.

The Rubber Knife Gang naturally clung together because they couldn't mess around town and meet all kinds of people like the town-kids

could. They called each other names like “Nose-Cheese” or “Squawly” because they were bored on the bus, which inevitably had to stop at least once a week on the way to school so Elden (real), the eighty-five year old bus driver, could pour a bag of pencil-shavings over a motion-induced vomit puddle. At least twice a week Elden would stop the bus and walk down the aisle meanly to stop horseplay. Kids would wait until Elden strode by and then stick their fingers close to his ass and twist them to try to make the kids he was glaring at laugh. But no one dared to laugh with Elden’s big leather driving gloves so close by.

At Christmas Elden gave them monster Hershey bars that they could chew on for weeks or until the chocolate got stale, until Elden retired, replaced by the man who gave them impossibly large icky sticky candy canes at Christmas that ma would find under the bed two months later covered with dust and hair and bled red and white.

The boys went crickin in Court Creek (real), camping out and streaking their faces with black warpaint and running around with Rambo knives until they couldn’t stand the mosquitoes biting, and retreating to the protective smoky mesh of the campfire. The girls went skinny-dipping with muddied bras because they were too shy to take them off until they got under the surface of opaque water, listened for the boys howling in the trees, sat in the middle of the cornfield where they were never supposed to

go and told each other stories about the children of the corn and the threat of a combine raging through the stalks and mangling them up. And they got scared and ran as fast as they could back to the bank where their muddied bras dangled from the branches of a baby oak.

The Rubber Knife Gang bonded because they couldn't ride their bikes the ten miles to Knoxville. Their parents wouldn't let them. So they're compelled to be together always.

Because they don't understand the meaning of always.

Seven whiter than white country kids who didn't understand the meaning of always.

*

Whenever Danielle reminded me that I should discuss her physical relationship with Jake, I refused. Nobody can put sex into words. And sex was much too mystical for me at that point.

One night my wife flung open the door to my study, pulled up her shirt and forced her long fingers to poke a small ring of loose skin. She mentioned something about being "fat." I stared. "You know how ridiculous that is, don't you?" I checked to see if she was staring at the screen, but she was looking at me with that dark green dagger glare. She left, slamming the door.

Maybe it was because Dirk's dumbass genes kicked in that the Dahinda Manifestation decided to spread the word about their coming manifesto with a rash of phony telemarketing.

Dirk had been working for a telemarketing firm after he quit his housekeeping job at the Dahinda B&B because he couldn't stand that his whole body, even his socks, smelled like burnt bacon and pancakes from the breakfast that Glenda Jacobs, the owner, made every morning, whether there were customers or not. He began to peel off his socks each night with a plastic clothespin on his nose and throw the smelly things in the trash.

Of course I suspect there was a more logical reason for quitting, but even dumbasses are allowed to have their obsessions.

Jake was pretty down when the Dahinda Manifestation gathered into the old clubhouse in Danielle's backyard. He even ripped down some of the red plastic psychedelic beads he had hung in the window. After two years, he was feeling discouraged. Twenty was starting to feel old. He couldn't even get a thrill from shrooming anymore; he just felt tired. Jake swung a string of torn-down beads in a circle and looked down at the spot where Dirk had puked on the old piece of shag carpeting the night before.

"*Dude*," Jake expectedly enunciated, "why'd you have to mow on hot fries and shrooms at the same time?"

Dirk laughed, like an uncertain dumbass, "*Dude*, I *gotta* eat somethin with em, or I'd *really* puke."

Danielle put her purple pen in her sultry mouth and pouted at Jake while addressing Dirk.

“Why even do it in the first place if it makes you sick? You’re supposed to *like* it.”

“Yeah, yeah. I *do* like it.”

Hogan Poe, nerdy mysterious intelligent, gazed out the cracked window. “I don’t think Ginny’s coming.”

“Of *course* not, shitface. Don’t expect Ellen, either. You over-*wooed*, dude.” Jake slung his arm about the back of Danielle’s smooth neck, and she pursed her lips around the pen.

Dirk pulled out an almost empty pack of Parliaments and crumpled it loudly in his hands. “You guys want us to leave so you can *do* it?”

Jake and Hogan think Dirk is a virgin, but Danielle suspects that Glenda Jacobs and her tendency to make breakfast in her old silk nighties had something to do with Dirk quitting his job at the B&B.

“Shut *up*, Dirk. We need to get this meeting started.” Danielle uncrossed her legs and opened her notebook. “Great. I’m the only *woman* again.”

“*Chick*.” Jake bit at her neck, impossibly suave.

She ignored him. “Minutes from the last meeting go a little something like *this*. We need to get this shit out there. Start small, get big. That’s what we talked about. *Then* all the *males* in the room suggested that we group-masturbate which, *as usual*, was turned down.” Dirk laughed – the same

way he does every time Danielle mentions the usual masturbation remarks. Like a dumbass.

Danielle slapped the notebook closed. “Shut *up*, Dirk. Fucking prick. We don’t have a manifesto and we don’t even have a reason to write a manifesto because we can’t get our heads out of our asses long enough to think like mature human beings.”

I felt the same way. They hadn’t written a manifesto – they just kept talking in a wordy circle-jerk. But I couldn’t help it. Besides, what are a bunch of kids going to “manifest about” that’s of any consequence?

Danielle tossed the notebook to the floor. “*Look*, guys, this isn’t gonna work. This was a good idea *two years* ago, but now it’s starting to be pretty fucking *stupid*.” She clapped her luscious lips shut and looked guiltily at Jake, who picked up the string of torn-down beads and began to swing them again.

Hogan and Danielle glanced back and forth from each other to the window to Jake swinging the beads, and both wished that Hogan and his horn-rimmed spectacles would not have used his mysteriously dark intellectual aura to get laid. Ellen and Ginny had both fallen for him, fucked him, hated each other then hated him then applied to college to get away from Dahinda which is what they were about to do. Danielle was now the

only girl in the gang, and Ellen and Ginny's extra brain power would have been beneficial at that moment of despair and doubt.

But something happened then, something that would briefly change everyone's perception of Dirk.

Briefly.

Dirk said something that wasn't dumbass, or didn't seem to be. For a while, he had been staring at his hot fries/shroom puke-stain in the shag carpeting, thinking about how much he hated his job. He had to say the same thing every time he called someone on behalf of TownBank credit cards, the company he telemarketed for this month. He hadn't been doing an especially good job this month, recording the lowest sales of all the employees. Dirk figured that it was a matter of having the wrong tone because he sort of realized that he was kind of a dumbass. He rarely kept a customer on the phone for more than ten seconds.

"Hello. May I speak with Janis, please?"

A lot of the people he called were busy or having a bad day or had moved several months ago.

"Who's calling?"

"Mrs. Johnson, this is Dirk calling on behalf of TownBank. And we have a very special offer for you today –"

"It's *Ms. Jensen*, sonny, and don't call me again." Click.

Dirk began to wonder why he couldn't speak effectively. He realized, however, that he should thank the Presbyterian God from his dumbass dad's rarely opened Bible, for the opportunity to get away from Glenda Jacobs and her mothball-ridden silk nighties.

Danielle defended Dirk by asserting that at least he didn't try to fight trains, like his dumbass dad, although he did jump in front of a speeding moped once when he was drunk, but the moped successfully swerved and kept on its way.

Dirk kept staring at the shroom stain, long enough for him to achieve a Dirk-style clarity. And it was on this stirring day that Dirk realized that the people sitting in this clubhouse were *not dumbasses*. Hogan read a lot and Jake was so cool and assertive with people and Danielle was smart, even if she was totally whipped by Jake, and Ellen and Ginny (where were they, anyway?).

Dirk thought hard and surprisingly fast. The puke-stain started to blur, he was thinking so much, and he blurted. He blurted so much so quickly that Hogan, Danielle, and Jake all stopped doing whatever quirky thing they were each doing at the moment. He blurted his idea like he was a flood from Spoon River (real) drowning Court Creek:

Spread the impending manifesto through the use of personal phone calls!

So, the Dahinda Telemarketing Manifesto began. And it will soon die an utter failure if they don't come together as a unified group and actually start writing a fucking manifesto.

But I'm not sure if I care anymore. It's been seven months since my wife left me to go be inside of herself. Six months since I've been trying and failing to be inside of myself. This is lunacy!

And my characters are Russian dolls, wooden figures housing more figures that open smaller and smaller into eternity. I can never know them.

I can't. I can't ever know them. I think I'm dying.

My wife is coming upstairs now so she can go to bed. I must be dying.

"We haven't died – we're not dying." Danielle is in my ear, leaning. Her clean wisp of breath dots my skin with bumps. My fingers are paralyzed. I can't make this fantasy. I need her to open up, entrails glistening. I close my eyes and her pouty lips are still near, her tongue hiding steamy behind the edges of her teeth. I wish she would bite me. She is strangely quiet.

"Hey. You. Writer-man."

"What? What, Danielle?"

"I don't *have* any fucking motivations."

She's gone. I've lost her.

I'm completely hard. My wife is next to me, her forehead crinkling. I see her hazel eyes watching my lap. She is looking at me. Really looking at me.

Her warm cheek hovers near my earlobe as she whispers, “Can we come back?” and sinks onto my lap.

“Yes.”

My wife has lovely brown hair that I grasp in my palm as I cry.

“Yes.”

We are a snowglobe, miniscule and shaken to fragments.



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